Alexander Kontorovich

PREDATOR

The novel based on the video game Escape from Tarkov

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Chapter 1

Drip. Drip. Drip. The drips of water fall into the saucepan, already almost a third full. I have no idea where this pipe comes from or where it's going, but there's water in it! Perfectly good water, in fact – clean, even. I send a silent prayer of thanks to the unknown bungler who's to blame that the pipe joint leaks. If he'd been a decent welder, I'd have had to look elsewhere for my *eau de vie*... So, that's one problem solved. Just one, and there are plenty more. And water's not the most important of them. Top of the list is survival, then finding something to eat. Everything else comes after that.

Looking back, I remember those beautiful books with vivid covers showing burly, virile, for some reason always bare-chested men with one arm thrown around a sexy blonde (why were they always blondes, I wonder?), and the other holding a heavy machine gun. In the background, all sorts of bad guys would be flung around in unseemly poses. And everything always worked out alright for those heroes. They always found a stash of useful loot at just the right time, and their mandatory special forces training meant they always knew the right moves. And need I mention their ability to hit a gnat's eye from 100 meters with any type of weapon? Of course not!

Yup, those literary heroes had it good. Shame that I'm not in a book, and not ex-*spetsnaz* (They're never maimed or shellshocked either, mind). I don't have the massive muscles, or ten years of action in difficult circumstances behind me.

I do know how to write computer programmes. In all honesty, I'm quite good at it. And I've always kept myself reasonably fit. I can walk, run and jump. For now, anyway. I went camping and hiking often enough, too, so I know how to make a fire. I even slept under fir trees in a sleeping bag a

few times. I can probably manage to put up a tent, too. And I always cooked for myself, so there's no need for a personal chef

I look at the saucepan – the water hasn't even reached the halfway mark. Have I got time to run upstairs? No, I'd better wait until the water reaches the top. Then some goes into my water bottle, and the rest goes to filling up the bucket. Sadly, the bucket doesn't fit under the pipe, otherwise I wouldn't have to keep watch.

God alone knows when the water in the pipe will dry up. It may only last for a day or it could turn out that it keeps on dripping for ages. Nothing is predetermined, and nothing is clear. Nothing at all. Except for one thing – you and your life are of no interest to anyone. The stuff you carry with you, that has a value.

So, what do I have of value? My water bottle? It's a good one, no doubt about it. Bought in a proper shop. It's a solid can with a little cup for a lid, all wrapped in a good camouflage case.

A pocketknife. Also, basically, not bad. Bought in the same shop. I was an idiot – you should always stock up on things like that, and all I got was a water bottle and a knife. Back then I was trying to make a good impression on a new girl in the office. I took her out to dinner, and that's where all my money went. What a prat! What was her name, by the way? Nina? Or Ninelle? I can't even remember. Damn, it's weird how fast such vivid memories fade...

* * *

How did it all begin? Kind of mundanely, really. For several days our office went nuts trying to fulfill an urgent order that came down from on high – straight from Terra Group headquarters. Couriers ran up and down the corridors, dragging folders of documents here and there. The bosses required us to perform an urgent inventory of warehouse stock and industrial equipment. And as the holding was not small, everyone's nose went to the grindstone. If anyone should naively think that for this we had

to crawl through workshops and warehouses with lists in our hands, then they're absolutely wrong. What do they think digital inventory was invented for? Exactly for that purpose, although as it turned out, it couldn't completely replace the heaps of papers and the running down corridors.

To speed up the working process, all our team along with the computers and documents was loaded up into buses and taken not just anywhere but to the Côte d'Azur Hotel. They'd rented out a whole block to accommodate us. True, I was a little concerned by the armed guards on the ground floor. At the doors and around the block, there were USEC staff on guard in full battle dress. What the hell? After a barrage of uncomprehending questions, it was explained to us that there had been several outbreaks of criminal activity in Tarkov, that the authorities were not coping, and that the management had no desire to risk the life and health of their valued personnel. So stay here and be happy! Plus, it'll be easier to work here, with nothing and nobody to distract you from your labours. They even took our mobile phones away. Which came as no surprise to anyone – that was standard practice.

In the final week there was no time off at all. We were at our desks all day and all night. They might as well have put camp beds by our computers. Water, coffee, and all kinds of instant soups and porridge pots were laid on in large quantities. For female staff, they even kitted out special shower rooms with some kind of whirlpool baths. Anything to keep us working! And we did. We managed to finish the project on time. They even promised us some kind of special bonus. Not that they paid anyone at the time – don't worry, it'll be in your account. Later...

And when all the rush was over, they led us outside, put us back on the buses, and took us back under heavy guard. They dropped us off by our offices, and drove off suspiciously fast.

True, there was one strange moment. At first they didn't want us, the IT and admin staff, to leave – said there was more work to do. But something didn't quite work out, the head of security was called off elsewhere, and we took advantage of that to get on the accountants' bus – nobody was holding them back. So, we left with them, and our minibus remained standing in front of the block.

We all got off the bus, took a look around, and headed straight for the pub. Actually, it was the café that we normally dashed to for lunch. True, some of us were desperate to get home, which was quite understandable. Masha, for example, had a cat, and how long had it gone unfed? But those of us who had nothing to feed or water at home but ourselves – we stayed at the café. We settled in, moved a few tables together, looked around, and only then did we sense that something wasn't quite right. Nobody was rushing over to take our orders, which was definitely odd as we were longstanding and popular regulars. Not cheapskates, either – we always tipped well! But there wasn't sight or sound of a waiter, just the noise of someone opening and closing cupboards in the kitchen.

"Hey, is anyone alive in here?" Pasha Galperin asked impatiently.

In response, a face was stuck out of the kitchen.

"What do you want?" asked its owner unceremoniously.

"We'd like to eat."

"Well, go and eat then," shrugged the man. "What's the need to shout?"

"Well, where are the waiters?"

"Who the hell knows?" answered the owner of the face uncertainly, and then vanished.

"I beg your pardon? What on earth does that mean?"

We searched but found nothing. There were no staff on duty anywhere. In the service areas we saw a couple of guys who gave us not remotely friendly stares but, seeing the extent to which we outnumbered them, said nothing and then left the place, again suspiciously quickly. Again, weird. What's going on here? The mood was ruined. Nobody wanted to hang out anymore. Everybody just wanted to get home.

After waiting patiently half an hour for a bus, I give up and call a taxi. Much good it does me. “Number not in service.” And not just one number, I tried three different cab firms. To hell with them. They say walking’s good for your health.

If we’re talking about physical health, that’s probably true. But during that walk home my mental health deteriorated significantly. The city was gripped by some kind of commotion. People were hurrying here and there, almost running. There’s something disturbing about a high-end SUV crammed to the gills with all sorts of household junk, and I saw several cars like that. Before my eyes, cars were hurriedly being loaded up with anything at hand. Thank god nobody was carrying pot plants or washing machines, else one might have thought a war had suddenly started, and everyone was rushing to evacuate the city. A stupid idea, where are you going to run to? There’s nowhere missiles can’t reach.

Anyway, here’s my house. It’s a modern building, but not too tall. Just six floors. They say it was some kind of cutting-edge project. There must be some reason I pay Tarbank all that money every month! The lift was working, so I got to the third floor no problem. I opened my front door, flopped onto the couch, and barked “I want a film!” My home electronics responded appropriately – I am a coder, after all. Something clicked in the system, and the TV came on. So, what’s been going on? My home system’s smart, high-end. It’ll give me the latest news straight away. And it did.

For a while I sat in a stupor, grinning dumbly for some reason. Although there was really absolutely nothing to smile about. My brain stubbornly refused to put two and two together. It just didn’t want to soberly process what I had seen.

It turns out that all that time we were sitting in the office performing the inventory, terrible things were happening in the city. For some reason, all the different law enforcement agencies were up in arms, coming down hard on the management of different companies and plants. We, by which I mean our holding, were far from being an exception, by the way. A huge number of the top managers of various firms “unexpectedly” went on the run – thankfully for them the current border is no Iron Curtain. Then hot on

their heels everyone else started running, like they were all suffering from some colossal communal hangover.

It was one thing for the bosses. There's always something to grab them for. Modern business... well, you know what it's like. Not always easily differentiated from certain crimes. Tax evasion in particular. That there's a real mess. No wonder everyone jokes that it's safer to kill someone than not pay your taxes. After all, murder actually has to be proved, while the taxman can just go ahead and freeze your accounts without any evidence whatsoever – go and prove you're innocent! So yes, I understand the bosses. Who'd want to swap their cosy bed for a bunk in a Pre-trial Detention Center? That's what they call the county jail these days, isn't it? Or is that somewhere else?

But the rest of them – where were they off to? If you're an accountant, fair enough. You'll be first to do time after the managers. But if you're the average engineer or programmer, then what the hell are you running for? The police will mess around for a week or two, make a great show of locking someone up. What's the problem? They're not going to put everyone away, are they?

It seems not everyone shared my optimism. The same news report informed me that it had all ended up in sporadic shootouts. It came as a nasty shock. I had no idea that losing your shit was such an infectious condition. That was when the ordinary folk started running. Gunshots outside your window tend to ruin a good night's sleep. They left in all sorts of ways – in their own cars on the highway, on ships out of the port, and there were even some special evacuation buses.

And so it had gone on up to the present day. The authorities, as always, were making announcements to calm the people. But from what was going on outside, it didn't seem like anyone was listening.

Basically, it was all some kind of bad joke. The café had closed down. Or opened up, depending how you looked at it. Remembering the guys we saw hanging round there, I doubt very much they had anything to do with the staff. They'd mentioned on the television that such kind had started looting cafés and shops in these troubled times. Sounds about right.

Hang about... What do I have in the way of food? An inspection of cupboards and the fridge brought little joy. A few instant soups, various grains (about three kilos altogether), a few tins, and couple of bottles of whiskey. That was the lot. I would normally get my meals delivered, and what I kept was only for snacks. A few attempts to order dinner ended up much as expected – nobody was taking calls. Something's very wrong with the network. Grabbing a big bag, I head for the shop.

Well, aren't I the clever one? The first shop I came to greeted me with locked doors and heavily shuttered windows. Never mind, there's more than one shop. Ah, hell – the second one's also closed. As I approach the third, I hear some kind of noise and shouting. I turn the corner.

Ba-bam! Here we go then! I drop to the ground (as they always tell you to on TV) and take a look around – what's going on here?

Nothing good, that's for sure. Out of the smashed shop window, two tough-looking guys in camouflage are dragging somebody's cold dead body. Clearly, it's a corpse, just look at the blood dripping on the tarmac. And those guys are definitely law enforcement. Look at the assault rifles, the identical camouflage, and the walkie-talkies. Time to move, I'd say.

"Stand where you are!"

Now, there's an interesting question. If you're trying to crawl away, how best to respond to that kind of order? Just in case, I decide to freeze on the spot and refrain from asking. Who knows if they share my sophisticated sense of humour?

I hear their footsteps approaching. They kick me in the side, but not hard.

"Get up and keep your hands where I can see them."

I show them my open palms (and who'd have thought, they're barely shaking), trying to move calmly.

"What's in the bag?"

“It’s empty. I was going shopping. For food.”

They tug the bag from my shoulder and turn it inside out.

“Show us some ID.”

“I’ve only got my work pass with me.”

“Let’s see it.”

I pull the pass in its plastic cover out of my pocket.

“So... Karasev, Denis Viktorovich?”

“That’s me.”

“The photo looks like you. Where do you live?”

“Larch Alley, 5. Flat 15. On the third floor.”

My interrogator turns to his comrades, who have now finished searching the corpse and are slowly moving towards us.

“Hey, Commander! This guy’s a local. Lives near here. He came out to do some shopping, would you believe?”

“Are you shitting me or what?”

They surround me, go through my bag again, and pat down my pockets.

“Absolutely empty! Where do these morons come from?”

“Why, what’s happened?” I ask carefully.

“How did you get to be so naive?”

“We had a work crisis... Didn’t leave our desks for nearly a week. We even slept there.”

One of the new arrivals, judging by the attitude of the others towards him the commander himself, laughs.

“All hell’s broken loose!”

“Is it war?”

“Not yet, it isn’t. But that doesn’t mean it won’t be. Nearly all the civilian population’s gone already. Today they closed all the exit routes.”

“But... What should I do? They have to get us out of here!”

“The powers have already moved everyone who needs moving. Come on, boys. We’ve still got two stops to make.”

They’ve lost interest in me. The officers returned my work pass and turned to go.

“Wait! What about the shop? Where can I get some food?”

“Vasya, give the poor sod something.”

A couple of tins are dropped at my feet. Without turning back, the assault rifles disappear around the corner.

It’s all a bit too much... They’ve just killed a guy! Surely the police should be here, examining everything, writing up a report of some sort. And what about me? What am I supposed to do? Am I a witness? But then I didn’t really see anything.

Having picked up the tins, I step round the dead body and take a look through the smashed window. Not much left for me, then. Looks like the shelves have been stripped of everything. All that remains are a few bottles of mineral water lying here and there. Does that mean the dead guy refused to share something with the officers? And they killed him for it without a moment’s hesitation. Christ, it’s kind of scary just going into the shop. But I have to. According to those guys the situation’s the same everywhere.

I climb through the window, trying not to cut myself on the shards of broken glass. So, the bottles go into the bag. What else have we got? Hey, cigarettes! But then, I don't smoke. Still, a sneaky little voice inside of me keeps saying "Go on, they're free! And there's no one around!"

My eyes search for the till as my hand reaches for my credit card. "Idiot! What are you thinking? What use is the bloody till when there's a dead man in the doorway!" Well, yes. Really, what am I thinking? The card goes back in the wallet, the wallet back in the pocket, and a carton of cigarettes goes into the bag.

There's no bread, nor are there any more tins. From the look of it, it's not the first day they've been poking around in here – the place has been ransacked. They didn't take the water, but I guess nobody's worried about dieting right now. So, what about baby food? Well, if it's alright for babies, then why not for adults. I can just see myself eating Baby Mum-mum for breakfast.

A loud bang from around the corner tore me from my daydream. Idiot, there's serious shooting going on out there! Time to get moving.

As I run into my building, I remember what it is that's been bothering me all this time. The insignia on the commander's sleeve. During my brief military service, we had all sorts of visitors to battalion headquarters. Officers and other ranks, infantry and all the other more obscure branches. They wore all sorts of different emblems and badges, but one thing they all had in common was that none of them featured foreign letters. But that badge was waving right in front of my face, so I got a pretty good look at it, and the lettering on it was definitely not Russian. A shield with a sword turned with the hilt up, and the inscription BEAR. What branch of the Russian army does that come from? I doubt very much it refers to a police division, either. And as for all those special services agencies, what can you say? Seems unlikely they'd stand for fancy foreign letters.

On my way home, I noticed that there were far fewer cars in the courtyards. Seems like while I was sitting on the couch watching the news, those with more brains than me were getting the hell out of Tarkov. Well, well, we'll see. I can't think of many places where they welcome refugees

from distant climes. Or from anywhere, for that matter. This isn't Europe, and even there they've been having trouble recently.

My own building greeted me with darkness in the entryway. Have they turned the power off? But wait, no, the lift's working. What's going on? By the light of the torch on my phone it becomes clear – someone's unscrewed the bulbs. So that's what we've come to, already stealing light bulbs.

Back in the flat, I lock the door behind me and begin to lay out my spoils on the couch. I didn't manage to get much, but thank the Lord for what I did find. It's enough to keep the wolf from the door for a day or two.

I put the kettle on the stove, then heard the mellifluous tones of the doorbell. Pasha Galperin's face appeared on my monitor. What the hell was he here for?

"Door's open!" I shouted, and the system, ever obedient to my command, unlocked the door.

"Hi!"

"Greetings and salutations! Come on in, I just put the kettle on."

"Now's not the time. Did you hear they killed Misha?"

Wait...

"Frolov?"

"Yeah."

Our system administrator. My colleague. A good-natured goof in round glasses who looked a bit like John Lennon. A totally easy-going, excellent guy. Who could have a problem with him?

"You're kidding..." I say uncertainly. "Wait, who told you?"

“Don’t you know what’s going on out there?” asks Pasha, his voice rising to a shriek.

I wasn’t expecting such an outburst of emotion, and couldn’t work out straight away how to answer.

“It’s chaos... Some guys with assault rifles shot a bloke right in front of me, and the police never showed!”

He starts to pace nervously round the flat. From what he’s saying, I gradually begin to understand that the situation is much worse than I assumed.

Chaos, or more accurately organized disorder, had already taken hold of the whole city. Shootouts on the streets. The police had vanished somewhere, and nobody was doing anything to stop these sudden skirmishes. It wasn’t at all clear who was fighting who. On his way to my place, Pasha had also been shot at, and only the speed of his car had saved him. He’d gone to see Frolov first, and found his corpse in the doorway. Someone had shot Misha several times in the chest, then finished him off on the floor with a shot to the head.

“I knelt down beside him, and suddenly I hear someone moving around inside. I legged it!”

“Why did you come here?”

“You live nearby, and you’re a better driver than me.”

That’s true. Pasha bought his license, but sadly couldn’t also buy the ability to drive the Mazda he bought on credit. He could just about manage to get around the city without crashing, but out on the highway it was a different story.

“It’s time to go. Right now!”

“Hang about, I’ve got to get my stuff together.”

“What stuff? Do you really not get it? We need to leave. Fast.”

Say what you will about Pasha, he can be convincing. I just couldn't find any objections. Followed round the flat by his constant shouting, I feverishly shoved anything useful I could find into a backpack. It wasn't even my biggest backpack, but sad to say there was still plenty of space to spare. I used to think everything I had was necessary and useful. Like hell! Outside the flat, it wasn't worth a thing. What on earth was I going to do, for example, with a golf club, even if it was signed by the vice-president of Terra Group?

Slamming the door, we head downstairs. In the entrance, we're met by another familiar face – Demyan Slootskiy. A programmer just like me, although he works in the next department. The funny thing is that we even look quite alike. In the office, they joke that it's the job that smooths out the differences in appearance. And he and Pasha are almost neighbours, live on the same staircase. Galperin must have left him in the yard on purpose to guard the car. He had a point, I guess, although what exactly could Demyan do against even one armed man? We quickly load up my stuff and get into the car. It's warm inside. Pasha's even kept the engine running, with the heater working all this time.

"I'm thirsty," whines Slootskiy.

"Well, I've got mineral water upstairs. And we've got a long road ahead of us."

"Just get it fast, then. And what are you taking your jacket for, for Christ's sake?"

Good point. I even managed to work up a sweat with all this running around. Why would I put it on?

I dash back into the building, up in the lift, through the door, and there's the water on the table.

I grab the bottle and slam the door. The lift sings its little song, and I'm back on the ground floor. I run towards the steps. Shit, my laces! I almost went arse over tip. I crouch down...

Bang! Bang!

“Aaaaa!” A wild shriek sweeps in from the yard. It bounces off the glass and echoes deep in the entryway.

“Shut him up!”

Two more shots cracked dryly.

“Now they’re done twitching.”

“Check their documents. Bags, coats. Go through everything.”

I press myself into a niche in the foyer. There were supposed to be flowers here, but no one ever got the money together.

“That’s Galperin. His photo’s right here on his license.”

“Who’s the other one?”

“He’s got nothing with him.”

“Then get up those fucking stairs! Karasev should live here, too, and he’s on the list. Third floor, Flat 15. No hanging around.”

I hear steps and try to make my spine grow into the concrete. True, there’s no light in the entryway, thanks to the unknown light bulb thief. But they might have a torch with them...

“Boss, there’s a pass card here. It’s Karasev.”

“So that’s who he was hurrying to see. I guess he made it that far. Makes no difference, we still have to search the flat. Who knows what he’s got up there?”

Again I heard boots on tarmac. Now they’ll come through the door and shine their torches around. But then, why would they? What do they need light for in here? It’s not that dark outside yet, they may not have torches, and the lift door is always lit up with LEDs. You can’t miss it. And

that's exactly what happened. A couple of the bad guys made straight for the lift without hesitating, and only at the last minute did one of them shine a light on the call button for some reason. The lift played its little tune, and the cabin rose to my floor.

So far, so good. Now they go up there, break into my flat somehow, take a look around, and then what?

I don't know exactly what they're looking for, but it's going to take them all of five minutes to turn everything in there upside down. I don't have that much furniture in the flat – it's all modern minimalism. And then... Then they come back down. Makes no difference how they come, on foot down the staircase or back in the lift. Either way, they'll see me. My niche is easily visible from the bottom of the staircase and from the lift door. And now I know they have a torch.

So, I've got five minutes left, have I? Well, maybe six or seven. They'll bury me here. Should I run outside? Yeah, right. How many of them are there out by the car? Perhaps they're all deaf and blind? No, it's really not funny.

I don't know quite what got into me, but instead of looking for a safer hiding place, I took off running up the staircase. The stairwells in our house are all modern and minimalist, too, with no recesses or twists. Wherever you go, you can see everything. And there's no need for a torch, the lights are still on. I did at least have the brains to keep quiet, even taking off my shoes and climbing the stairs in my socks. First floor, second floor. Above me there was a crash and a screeching sound. My poor door!

"You are illegally entering private property. I will now call the police."

My alarm system! I installed it myself. Fat lot of good it's going to do me now. The police won't even come out for murder.

"Stupid bitch!" swore somebody upstairs. "I almost started firing. Take that!"

There was a smash and the voice of the alarm fell silent.

“That’s more like it!”

Having reached my floor, I take a careful peek round the corner. My door is wide open and the hallway light is on, though I remember turning it off. There’s nobody in the doorway, but voices can be heard from inside the flat.

Let’s go!

Pressing my shoes to my chest and trying to make as little noise as possible, I cross the passage and turn on to the flight of stairs going up. And that’s where I lose my nerve. I flop on the floor right where I am. I just can’t go any further up. It was all I could do to get to the landing.

The voices sounded louder. It seemed clear the bad guys had found nothing and were now leaving.

“Rig up something there just in case.” It’s the same guy who was scared by the alarm system.

“What the fuck for? The owner’s lying downstairs!”

“You never know... One of his friends might drop by.”

“Ha! Like they’ll live that long. And what if his neighbour pokes his nose in?”

“What do you care about his neighbour?”

“Yeah, fair enough,” agrees the second bad guy.

There’s some scratching and scraping. While he’s waiting, the first guy has a smoke, judging by the smell rising up the stairwell.

“There we go. Just like they taught us. They’ll never put those bones back together.”

“With any luck the smartarses who hired us won’t give a fuck about the details.”

The song of the lift doors opening rings out, and I’m left all alone.

What would the hero of an action film do now if they were in my place? They’d run down, find the tripwire, disarm it, and throw the grenade after the bad guys. As far as I know, they use grenades to make that sort of trap. Which means you could throw it just as the bad guys were coming out of the front door. No doubt that’s what an action hero would do, but I’m not in a film and I don’t know how to disarm a tripwire. During my year of military service, I only fired an assault rifle twice, and I’ve never even seen a grenade except in the movies.

So, I stay sitting there on the staircase. I heard doors slamming in the yard, and the roar of the motor pulling off. Then something flickered across the window. I didn’t need to look outside to know what that was. Galperin’s Mazda was burning. Along with the smoke, my last chance of escaping this nightmare drifted away.

I don’t remember how long I sat on the staircase. Nobody came in or out of any of the flats, and the house was completely silent, as if all the residents had given up the ghost. More likely, they’d all fled the city. It was only thirst that brought me to my senses. I desperately wanted something to drink, but I had nothing with me. I stand up. My bones crack and my muscles ache. How long have I been sitting here?

The Mazda had stopped burning and was now just smoking. The stinking fumes poured out of the windows and spread through the yard. I couldn’t see my mates’ bodies, so I assumed they were inside the burnt out car. Where to now? My empty water bottle was hanging on my belt, and my knife was in my pocket. That was all I had. No food or water, nothing.

I turn the corner and set off towards the same ransacked shop. There was mineral water there, and at least that’s something.

Strangely, I didn’t see a single passing car or person on the way. It was as if the whole city had died. At the end of my street as I turn towards

the store, I see a fresh scratch with traces of paint on the side of a building. Clearly somebody had a close shave. And there's the car. Turns out they didn't get far anyway. The windows are smashed and the doors riddled with bullet holes. No luck for the driver. And then comes the smell... the smell of blood. Splashes of red cover part of the windscreen and spray across the passenger-side window. Summoning my willpower, I walk around the car and look warily inside. No luck for the driver – his last drive didn't get him far. A giant of a man lies slumped across the wheel, his head sticking into the instrument panel. That's one big guy. How did he ever fit behind the wheel? It's clear why they shot him straight away. If someone that size had time to get out, there'd be no stopping him. His pockets are turned inside out and the glove compartment's open. On the back seat, some eviscerated bags are scattered about in a spill of clothes, spanners, and screwdrivers. Looks like the guy was in a hurry. Looks like he didn't get too far. The boot's open, too, but there's nothing in it apart from the spare wheel.

I feel terrible, and move away fast, willing myself not to throw up. But what would I throw up anyway? I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon.

Time to get to the shop! Nothing's changed much there since yesterday. Not much to tempt the window shopper in the ransacked store. And the bottles of water are still in one piece. I grab one thirstily and just drink and drink. Phew, that's better! I almost empty the bottle.

Shit, how can I carry more than three or four? Christ, I'm an idiot. There was a bag in that car, wasn't there? Didn't look like it was covered in blood, either. I run back and grab the bag, and while I'm at it pick up some spanners, screwdrivers, and pliers from the floor. Why? Tools always come in useful. Now, back to the shop.

I managed to fit seven bottles of water into the bag, along with a few packs of bread snacks (beggars can't be choosers), a packet of some grain or other – and that was all I could find. Everything else was sold out before I got there. I take a look around. Yesterday's corpse is beginning to smell, or is that just my imagination?

Something catches my eye. What is it? I don't get it. There's an idea jumping around in the back of my head, but I just can't work out what it is. It's only as I'm leaving the empty shop that I realize what it is – a jacket! I should have taken the jacket off the dead driver. It was lying on the floor. But then, it was covered in blood. How could I put that on? "Don't be fussy," nags a voice in my head. "Are you planning to run around at night in just that shirt? Aren't you the tough guy!"

Still, it's not that cold yet. During the day your teeth don't chatter, at any rate.

But then I remember my night on the staircase. There was no draft, but you wouldn't say it was warm, either. And that was in a building. A residential building, mind, with a good heating system. A building I can't go back to, either. What am I going to do, knock on my neighbour's door and say: "Sorry, but they tried to kill me here yesterday and put a tripwire in my flat. Mind if I stay with you for a while?" I can imagine the response.

Which reminds me, where can I go? Round to one of my co-workers and risk catching a bullet? Clearly they were looking for us from some kind of list, and I doubt it was just the three of us on there. Apparently, it's the people I was working with the last few days. So I might meet yesterday's visitors at any of their homes.

So, where am I heading, then? Nothing comes to mind. Do I really want to crawl into some basement like a homeless guy? Well, the basements round here aren't so bad. Hell, some of them even have offices in them. I've been in quite a few. True, they nearly always have steel doors. But then again, I've got tools now. And there's an office I know not so far from here.

Alas, my talents as a housebreaker were enough only to pull the decorative cover off the keyhole. Beyond that, it was just thick steel that I could do nothing with. Any attempt to pick the lock with a bent piece of wire was stymied from the start – I didn't have any wire. And even if I did, I had no idea how to bend it. Somehow, I doubt a simple right angle's enough... Having spent a couple of hours trying to get in, I gave up, sat down on the steps, and opened up a pack of Baby Mum-mum. There's no need to laugh. I'd like to see what you'd do in a similar situation.

What about the window? It’s got bars on it. Damn, what am I going to do? If only I had a crowbar...

Where could I get hold of a few good tools? All the shops were closed. At the port, obviously. But the port’s a fair hike away. There must be something closer. Construction sites! They’re bound to have crowbars, and all sorts of other useful stuff. That’s where to go, but where exactly? I didn’t know the address of the nearest construction site, but I had seen something out of the bus window. Hang on, I’ll get there just as night falls. And? Do I really have a choice? No, I don’t. Let’s go. But what about my supplies? What if I find something useful there? Where am I going to put it? The shop water, my water bottle, and the bread snacks find a temporary home at the bottom of the steps that lead down to the basement. You can’t see them from the street, and no animal’s going to find them. It’s not like I’ve got sausages or anything. I took only a single bottle with me, and the bag. Great, tomorrow I’ll bring a crowbar, and I can finally move in to my new digs.

Chapter 2

I can't say that my walk to the construction site made for a nice, leisurely stroll. When I was about half way there, frenetic gunfire started up not far away, and I heard the whistle of a bullet close by. I had absolutely no idea I could run that fast. In the end, I had to hide behind an empty garage and wait until the unknown opponents finally finished resolving their issues. It took them nearly an hour. Then there was a burst of automatic fire (from something bigger than an assault rifles, as far as I could tell), and everything fell quiet. Before that, most of the firing had been from shotguns and pistols, I think.

I waited another hour before finally emerging from my hideout. It was quiet and there was no firing. Who exactly had beaten whom was of no interest to me. The main thing is that there's no more whistling bullets and I can move on. I stick my head out from behind the garage and look around. Nothing. I make a dash for the cover of the nearest building. After another half-hour's walk, I notice a crane towering over the rooftops. I've made it! There's the construction site, and now it'll all be simple. I'll find a crowbar, and maybe a few other useful things, then I'm off. I may even have a roof to sleep under tonight.

I skirt round the building.

"Hold up there!"

Who's this, then?

A pair of guys in leather jackets. One's holding a hunting rifle, and the others not armed as far as I can see.

"What do you guys want?"

“Come here!”

I approach, trying to keep my distance. No good, the guy with the rifle jerks the barrel insistently, as if to say, “Don’t fuck about.” They tear off my bag and turn it inside out. The bottle of water falls to the ground and is kicked suspiciously by the one who’s searching me.

“Is that it? Show us your pockets!”

But there’s nothing of value there either – this pair aren’t interested in a few spanners.

“Are you taking the fucking piss? Show us your cash!”

“But, I don’t have any.”

Crack! The butt of the rifle slams under my ribs with full force.

Ah... That hurts!

“What the hell? What have I done?”

“Where do you live, arsehole?”

“Larch Alley, 5. Flat 15”

The two men exchange glances.

“Where’s that?”

“Miles away. What’s a shithead like this going to have, anyway? You, get up!”

They kick me forcefully and make me pick my bag up off the tarmac, then direct me with a poke between the shoulders.

We haven’t gone far before my nostrils catch the smell of smoke. We turn a corner, and in front of us appears a long fence topped with barbed wire. We walk along the fence, turn again, and come to some gates. They’re

closed. There's a fire burning next to them, round which sit several men. They're all armed, mostly with hunting rifles.

"Greetings, Mityay! Who've you got there?"

"Just some freak. Put him with all the others."

There's a mid-size building of corrugated iron to the left of the gates. After removing my bag and taking the padlock off the shack door, they shove me inside. I take a few steps and drop weakly to the floor. Christ, what in the hell's going on?

"Were you captured, too?"

I turn towards the voice. A middle-aged man in glasses with a cracked lens is sitting on the floor. A respectable citizen, by the look of him.

"Yes. They took everything and hit me with a rifle. What's going on here?"

"This, my friend, is the former depot of the Tarkov Municipal Housing Authority. And those men, if you can call them that, sitting outside are simple bandits. Or, at least, that's what they're becoming."

"But they've got guns."

"Not all of them, at least for now, but they're getting armed quickly. They rob apartments, and take anything of value. That's where they find rifles."

"What do they need me for?"

From my new acquaintance's explanation, I understand the following. He and his unwilling roommates have been there for three days already. When the troubles started, Pavel (that's his name) was expecting an organized evacuation, as he was convinced that it was the duty of the powers that be to do everything they could to ensure the safety of the city's residents. An error, as all the bureaucrats had fled at the first opportunity, leaving the city to the mercy of fate. After that, he was not sure what had

happened as, on his way to buy bread, he had been captured by Mityay's henchmen and incarcerated in this shed. Since then, twice a day, the prisoners were sent off to clear out buildings – those in the neighbourhood for now. Pavel had suffered a misfortune that morning. The beam they used to break down doors had fallen on his foot. He had returned to the shed with great difficulty, and was now incapacitated.

"So, what happens next? Do they feed us, at least?"

"Yesterday they gave us a little tinned fish. There's water over there." He indicated the direction with his head. "There's a tap in the toilet. I imagine they've captured you to replace me. I'm of no further use to them if I can't walk! I hope that they'll release me..."

Well, it's alright for some! He'll get to go free, but what about me? Will I have to slave away for some... Pavel, seeing my frustration, shook his head. In his view, our situation wasn't so bad, after all. Sooner or later, the bandits would have looted all the flats they needed, and then what would be the use of their captives, who had to be fed after all?

"You too will be released soon enough, I have no doubt. After a week or so... And the authorities will have to come back here sooner or later. They can't just abandon the city. Then those men outside will have to justify their actions, and having prisoners will only cause them greater difficulties."

Can't say I share his optimism, but there is at least a grain of logic in what he says. Anyway, what was he saying about water?

Having taken a good drink and splashed my face, I took a look around the improvised barracks. I found nothing of any use in the room we were in, and the doors to other rooms were not just locked but boarded over. After wandering around my jail for a while, I drop down onto a mattress left next to the wall. Time for a snooze, perhaps?

I was kicked awake. What the fuck? When did this become the in thing?

“What do you want?”

“What the hell are you doing in my place?”

A skinny, long-haired guy is giving me the evil eye.

“What’s so special about this mattress? There’s plenty more around.”

“Yeah, but this one’s mine.”

All the other inhabitants of the barracks are looking on with interest, it turns out. Granted, there’s not much else for entertainment. I’d take a swing at the guy, but I doubt that beam fell on Pavel’s foot by accident. He said, or at least hinted, as much. So, for now no fighting.

“This lump of crap’s all yours.”

I stand up and turn to go. The long-haired guy aims a swinging kick at me. He aims at me, but I manage to twist out of the way, so his foot goes full force into the wall of the shed. The iron gives a booming echo, and almost immediately a commanding voice is raised outside the door.

“Hey, what the fuck’s going on in there? Keep it down or I’ll be in to sort you out properly!”

It would appear the owner of the voice is a man of his word. Even the long-haired shit-stirrer pipes down instantly, muttering under his breath as he crawls away.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” says Pavel reproachfully. “We shouldn’t fight amongst ourselves.”

“But I didn’t touch him. That was all his own work.”

“That’s Grisha, our foreman. You should try to get along with him.”

“Naturally. Otherwise I get a beam on my foot?”

This offended Pavel, and he turned his back on me. But it looked very much like I was right.

It was remarkable that I got any sleep at all, and what I did get was fairly shaky. I woke up with a start a couple of times, and I'm pretty sure that at least once it was with good reason – somebody drew away from me in the darkness, without making a sound. Half asleep, I decided not to shout or make a fuss. What would be the use? No point in drawing attention to myself. I wait for a while, but nothing else happens.

* * *

"Well, my bare-arsed troops," shouts the red-haired gorilla who's got us lined up on parade, "congratulations on our new recruit!"

He nods in my direction.

"So, from now on you're going to work your little fucking hearts out. And no slacking, or you'll be getting your dinner for lunch – tomorrow's lunch! Any questions? No? Then best feet forward!"

We were assigned a section of a new residential building. Our guards led us to it and formed up the whole group out front for instruction, which was short and brutally simple.

The men carrying the beam go first, all the way to the top floor. Then, from top to bottom, they break open the front doors of all the flats using their improvised battering ram. They keep going from floor to floor without stopping. Behind them come the search groups, with two men for each flat. A guard with a pistol goes into each flat first, and keeps an eye on the search group while they work. The guard is also the last to leave. Another guard, this time with a rifle, stands on the top landing of the staircase, keeping watch over the whole process.

You're allowed to eat anything that's on the tables or in open tins or jars. You mustn't open any food packages. Instead you take them out to the

landing and sort them by type. Then they're removed by the porters, a separate section of our crew. As for clothes, coats, trousers, and shoes are stacked separately. Formal wear and all women's clothes, we leave behind – no one wants them. The same goes for all types of electronics. Any valuables we find, we tell the guard immediately. We are forbidden from touching any weapon whatsoever, including kitchen knives, otherwise we'll be shot on the spot. And that goes for the offender and whoever's with them, too. There's a prize for finding money, valuables, or weapons – two tins of any food your heart desires. You can eat your prize right there and then, but you're not allowed to share it with anyone, or it'll be taken away from you.

There's a whole separate set of rules for medicines. We collect all of them. As for alcohol, special care and attention should be paid. That's about it.

"Any questions? Anyone hard of hearing? No? Then let's get on with it!"

Our long-haired foreman stepped forward.

"So, you and you," he pointed with a dirty finger, "on the beam. And you two."

That included me.

The guys with the beam have the least enviable job. I understood that from conversations overheard in the morning. They don't have to run up and down like the porters, and they don't risk incurring the wrath of the guards like the guys who gut the flats (that's what they're called, by the way – "gutters"). But that's where all the advantages end. Leave aside the fact that carrying the "beam" (a metal girder weighing about seventy kilos with handles welded onto it) is its own special kind of entertainment, once all the doors are broken down you have to help the porters. And there's no chance of getting hold of anything from the flats being searched. For that you'll be shot on the spot.

It's the gutters that have the most "desirable" (but also the riskiest) job. As a rule, the role goes to the guys the foreman gets on with. And I'm on not one of them, hence the beam.

I step up to the girder.

"Wait!" That's the guard.

Not to me, to the foreman.

"Yes, sir?"

"What have you got that streak of piss on the beam for?"

"We had an injury yesterday."

"Couldn't you find someone a bit bigger? He's all skin and bone, like a kid with rickets."

"No worry, he's strong enough."

The guard didn't like that.

"Are you fucking deaf, you little shit? What did I just say to you? Change him, now! I had quite enough yesterday with that four-eyed idiot and his broken foot! Maybe you want to carry the fucking girder yourself? No? Then do as you're fucking told!"

So, I became a porter. The work wasn't so bad. Pick up more and carry it faster, that's all there is to it. And whatever you do, don't drop or break anything, especially not a bottle of booze, or you'll be right in the shit. They even give us a bonus – if the bounty you carry down in an hour piles up to the height of the senior guard's hip, then they give you two tins of food – of their choosing. That's for all of us, eight guys in total. It's not a lot, but it's better than nothing. The guys on the beam don't even get that much.

And off we go. You run upstairs so that you can take more time coming down, and thus not drop anything. You don't stop for breath –

there' a break once an hour. Up, down, and up again we run.

Running past one of the flats that's being gutted, I glance inside and see on the wall a photo of a girl in a summer dress. The photo's big, and taken by a professional photographer. The girl's life-size, seems almost real. Jesus, was it all so long ago? I used to go out with beautiful girls like that, walk hand in hand. Ninelle... Suddenly, I can smell her perfume.

"Get on with it!"

Alright, alright, I'm running. Back upstairs again. I want a drink, but we're forbidden from entering the apartments.

"Time out!"

The beam slams to the tarmac. One of the guards has taken the trouble to arrange water for us. Off to one side, a gutter is slurping down the contents of a tin of food. The treasure he found – a gold watch – is now decorating the wrist of the senior guard.

We had earned nothing so far. If the senior guard hadn't given orders for us to be issued two packs of porridge oats, we'd have gone on grinding our teeth with hunger. Lucky us.

"Enough fun and games!"

Back to the staircase. The lifts in the houses don't work. It seems like the power's been turned off. There's no light in the flats, either. Where necessary, the guards use torches to light the way.

"School's out!"

Is that really it? It is. We've stripped the staircase bare. All the stuff we've stolen is too much to carry back in one go. After a quick examination, the senior guard orders a couple of men to keep watch while we carry the first load of loot back to the depot, unload it, and come back for the rest. Fortunately, we don't have to take the beam back yet – the

neighbouring staircase is our next target. The beam is left in one of the apartments, and the men who were carrying it requalify as porters.

We complete another raid. I'm dead on my feet, but instead of sending us straight back to the shed, they line the whole crew up in front of the gates. What have they got planned for us now? A few minutes pass before a procession comes out of the building. Accompanied by a bunch of henchman, a heavyset guy steps forward imposingly.

"That's Makar," whispers the man to my left.

"Who's he?"

"He's the boss round here – we all work for him."

And just behind the boss is none other than Pavel himself. Who'd have thought?

"Good evening to you all," says Makar, raising a hand.

The guards close to us make fierce faces, and we express our "pleasure" with one voice.

"If any of you remember, we promised you that freedom would be the reward for your hard work. Work for the common good! After all, there's nothing shameful in making sure that property abandoned by careless owners goes to those who have a genuine need for it."

We, of course, all thought the same, and a murmur of agreement ran through our ranks.

"And so," said our leader with a dramatic pause, "today, one of our company who is no longer able to work will be allowed to go home. And he won't be going empty-handed! He will be able to take with him any clothes he wishes, and as much food as he can carry."

It was strange somehow to hear such genteel speech from the mouth of a gang boss.

On a sign from our leader, the doors to the nearest warehouse are thrown open. Inside, all sorts of clothing are piled up in neat heaps. And we're not talking about women's hats or swimwear. No, stored here is exactly what a normal guy would need in this type of situation – strong boots, hard-wearing trousers, and a whole lot of coats – wool, leather, and even military-issue camouflage. There's a separate pile of bags and backpacks, as well as a bunch of handcarts.

Encouraged by kind words from Makar's henchmen, Pavel gingerly steps into the storeroom. He starts to dig around in the piles of clothing. Gradually growing bolder, he throws off his own clothes and pulls on a good leather jacket and a beautiful pair of boots. Idiot! Even I know that you need to take the tough ones, not the pretty ones that'll be worn out in a couple of months. He changes his trousers for a newer pair. They allow him to take a trolley, and he disappears round the corner, which must be where they keep all the groceries. Ten minutes later, he reappears with his trolley loaded so high he can barely push it across the tarmac.

"See," pronounces Makar with a regal wave, "work hard, and the same good fortune awaits you, too!"

The gates are opened with a scrape.

"Tic and Popeye, take the guy home! Make sure no one bothers him on the way!" says our leader. "We don't want anyone getting the wrong idea about us."

Pavel can't believe his own ears. They're setting him free with a trolley full of goodies! It's one thing to convince other people of the truth of your words, and quite something else to suddenly be convinced yourself. Not every optimistic blabbermouth gets that lucky. He smiles a disbelieving smile, waves to us, and turns towards the gates. Just as his hand falls back to his side, I notice a funny badge with a little smiling bear on the right pocket of his coat. I recognize it because the girl who sat next to me in the office had one just like it. Some youth movement or other, I can't quite remember.

They even gave us a meal, and not a bad one all things considered. To celebrate the great event, apparently. And then, all the celebrations finished. The moment we got back into the shed, somebody gave me a healthy crack on the back of the head. I came to somewhere away from the door. I could hear dripping... Was I next to the toilet?

“He’s awake,” somebody said.

I try to move with no success. Somebody’s sitting on my legs, and my arms are being held tight.

“Listen, smartarse!” The foreman’s voice comes through the darkness. “Tomorrow, you’re going to tell them just how much you want to carry the beam. Understood?”

“But it’s not up to me! The senior guard decides everything.”

“Makes no difference. You still tell them you want to. Is that fucking clear?”

“Couldn’t be clearer.”

“Alright,” sniffs the foreman. “Rough him up a little, just to make sure he understands I’m not joking.

So they rough me up a little, and I can’t get to sleep for hours.

As we form up on parade next morning, I look at the faces near me in the line. Last night, one of them was sitting on my legs, and someone else was holding my arms. And a third must have been hitting me, two of them couldn’t have managed it alone. So, what now? You’d have thought in the circumstances we should be helping each other. Should be, but in practice this is how it works. If I understand correctly, it’s every man for himself. You die today, and I’ll live till tomorrow. That’s what convicts used to say, I believe. I read about it all somewhere. Seems reasonable to believe that the beam will fall again soon, and this time on my foot. I doubt very much that I’ll be as fortunate as that jammy git Pavel.

We head off down the road. I've no desire to look around. What's there that I haven't seen already? And what would be the point? Maybe that's exactly the reason why I noticed that there was a bright stain on the road itself, or on the curb to be exact. My visual memory is pretty good, and it's often helped me out at work – I notice all sorts of little details on the screen, and fast. I was always the first to spot even one or two figures' difference in the length of a line of code. To be absolutely exact, the stain wasn't even on the curb but on the top of the roadside drainage ditch. I slowed my pace and felt my mouth go dry.

The teddy bear! The same one that was on the jammy git's coat! Next to rust-coloured stains in the sand. And I can swear those stains weren't there yesterday. I was carrying a bagful of heavy junk at the time, so was looking mostly at my feet. Right in this spot, too, because I remember the way the ditch comes right up next to the tarmac.

So that was where Makar's lackeys took him yesterday. What now, then? Should I tell the rest? And take away their last grain of hope? They'll suffocate me in my sleep with a mattress for that! And as for the foreman, he may well know something, or at least have worked it out for himself. Then he'll dob me in to the guards as a troublemaker. I won't even make it back to the shed.

"I want to take the beam!"

"Shut up, you squirt," says the senior guard, dismissing my offer calmly. "Grow some muscles first!"

The foreman sniffs behind my back. So that's that, this evening I can expect a further educational experience. And it's not a given that after that I'll be able to get back up and work in the crew. Very well, let's just say I've taken the hint.

So, back to running up and down stairs. The stairwell echoes with the ring of the beam-carriers' work. Where are they now? The fourth floor? Too soon, let's not rush this. My partner prods me in the back – no standing around! Alright, I'm running.

Now the crashing is on the third floor. I run down the stairs. From the clouds of dust I can see where the crew are working – chunks are flying off the door frame. The beam doesn't always break down the doors. Sometimes they've been fitted really well. Then the boys have to break down a party wall or smash the piece of wall holding the bolts of the locks. In most cases, as far as I know, they're all built the same way. There's only so many types of door.

Onto the second floor. I'm dying of thirst. My mouth is completely dry. Seizing the moment, I pause on the stairs and gulp from a bottle I'm carrying. It's just ordinary drinking water – I'm carrying a whole case. It's not vodka, so the guards aren't likely to pay much attention to my load, and it won't smell afterwards.

"Hurry up!"

The beam-carriers are going down to the first floor. Now's the time! As I run past them, I kick the man closest to me below the knee. He lets out a shriek and loses his balance. Then the heavy steel girder lurches dangerously.

Wham! Another guy's having trouble on the steps, and down he goes. Not just down, but forward, too.

"Fuck me!"

Inertia's a powerful force, and it can be a tricky fucker. The beam (with the help of a kick from me) is pulling the front two carriers forward with all its weight. The window flies out of the wall with a crash, followed by the beam, which pulls with it the two remaining carriers.

I crouch on the edge of the window sill, turn around, and hang by my fingers. A little to the left and down we go! Somebody's body breaks my fall. Thanks, friend, that's what I was counting on.

There are no guards on this side of the building – the doors are all on the other side. So there's nothing to stop me unless it's a bullet. As I round the corner, I stop for a second. There's no sound of gunfire, nor of anyone

chasing. Don't they miss me yet? That's fine by me. Wallow in your own shit, arseholes!

So, what would any normal person do in my situation? Run home as fast as he can, obviously. And I doubt he'd manage to run very far. How many other Makars are there out there with their gangs? That's not something I want to find out. I've no desire whatsoever to swap one shed for another. So, for now, let's not run anywhere.

Choosing a building – an ordinary five-storey block of flats – I climb over the fence and up to the first-floor balcony. Thankfully, the occupants of the ground floor have covered their balcony with a security grille, which serves as a kind of ladder to help my climb. It isn't that easy, but I manage to get up there. I still have the strength for now. I lie down on the balcony floor and take a look around. Some old clothes in a little cupboard. An axe! Not a big one, but then I'm not a lumberjack, am I? A can of motor oil, and all sorts of household junk. We'll leave that for later. Laying the old clothes on the floor, I soak them in motor oil. I look round carefully to check there's no one nearby. No one in sight, anyway. I press one of the oily rags against the pane of the window and give a sharp tap with the axe. The glass crunches quietly. I read about this in a book when I was still at school. *Young Guard*, that's what it was! It said that if you break glass with an oily rag, then it won't make a smashing sound. Turns out the author was basically right. I climb carefully over the sill and I'm in the flat. Hopefully, nobody saw my movements from the street. Now I can take a look round, provided I keep away from the windows. In the kitchen I find a stale loaf of bread, a little pasta that's long gone to mold, and two jars of home-pickled vegetables. The tomatoes are just what I need! And I can dip the bread in the pickle juice. I even find a little water to wash it down with. When I turn the tap, however, there's nothing but a sad whistle – the pipes are empty. Now I can stop holding my breath.

Basically, my escape was a success. It was all improvisation, but what choice did I have? Yes, I did cripple one of the beam-carriers, and it's quite possible I killed the second by jumping on him from the landing between the first and second floors. Let the great moral guardians weep and wail, but I don't feel the even slightest pangs of conscience. Nothing of the sort. This

very night, my cell-mates, as I guess we can call them, would have held my arms and legs while one of their number beat shit out of me. And I'm sure they'd all have slept soundly afterwards. Soon after that, one of the beam-carriers would have dropped that steel girder on my foot, and again I doubt their conscience would have bothered them much. "You die today, and I'll live till tomorrow!" Well, I've no desire to die just yet. I wouldn't want to give the long-haired foreman the pleasure. Dare I hope that he's getting the mother of all bollockings right now?

I told the bandits my address, so it's quite possible that somebody remembers it. No doubt they'll wait for me there. And good luck to them. Perhaps they'll even take a look inside. I'm all for it. There's nothing of any use to me there anyway. Everything I need I'll have to rustle up somewhere else. In these abandoned flats, for example. Why should I leave all the good stuff to the bandits?

Makar and his henchman are clearing out buildings gradually and methodically, leaving no stone unturned. At that rate, they won't even reach this building for a long while yet. So I can afford to rest for a while – Makar won't be looking for me this close to his "manor". He is, however, quite capable of sending a couple of his thugs round to my home, but there'll be no joy for them there. I've still got enough of my senses about me.

My sleep wasn't the most peaceful – someone managed to get up a shootout nearby. Not right next to the building, which was something to be grateful for. Still, it reminded me that I need to get out of here.

A search of the flat, following the methodology taught me by the bandits, brought only fairly modest results – clearly the former occupants were not rich. Apart from the home-pickled gherkins, I found apples and three tins – of mackerel, salmon, and tea. Which really wasn't bad. Plus some sugar. The rest was junk. I didn't bother to take the overcoat – not the season yet, but I did grab a leather jacket, even if it was a little worn. None of the shoes were my size, unfortunately.

I sit and wait for night. Not because I can see like an owl, but because nobody else will have that advantage either. And I do know where I'm going. As I say, my visual memory is pretty good. So, step by baby step, or

even crawling, I'm out of here. On my way towards home and as far as possible from this dump.

To be honest, I even snoozed for a while – my nerves weren't up to the waiting. When I awoke, it was already dark enough outside to hide the neighbouring building. I really had no idea that it could ever get this dark in the city. One way or another, there was always light somewhere. Even when there were power-cuts, somebody always found a light of some sort. But now it was absolutely pitch black! No fires, no lights. It was even a little frightening.

Then there were the sounds. The sounds of Tarkov used to be completely different. Now even the sound of the wind on the windows sounded strange. Somewhere there's a creaking noise of some sort. Apparently someone forgot to close a door. Then there's the rustle of all sorts of rubbish blowing in the breeze. And no sound of footsteps of car engines whatsoever.

Still, I need to move. I won't last long here with almost nothing to eat. And if I start gutting apartments like Makar's gang, I'll always be in danger of coming across someone better organized in the business. Then I'll be back to carrying the beam again, and even that's not the worst that could happen. Best avoided.

I decide not to leave via the balcony. What do they make doors for, after all? The lock is simple as. I wisely decide not to close it, and instead wedge the spring latch with a piece of paper to stop it snapping shut. I shove more paper in the crack between the stile and the jamb so the door won't swing open in the breeze. Not straight away, at any rate. Do I need a place I can run to in case of danger? I do indeed, and now I have one.

It was kind of awful in the stairwell. The whistle of the wind sounded very different from the way it did in the apartment.

Carefully pushing the door to the street ajar, I listen for a while to what's going on... No, nothing I could feel for now.

* * *

The street gives me a chilly greeting, and I mentally congratulate myself on getting hold of a leather jacket. Keeping my eyes (or rather my ears) peeled, I run to the next building. Another street, this time wider than the last. I glance around. My eyes are growing accustomed to the dark, and I can begin to make out the silhouettes of the buildings and the nearby trees. Still quiet for now. I choose my moment and quickly cross the street, coming away from the wall of the apartment building.

Nobody calls out or reacts in any way to my appearance. Great.

And off we go...

Dawn found me not so very far from my usual haunts. There was no point whatsoever in heading for any port, and obviously I wasn't planning on going home. A meeting with Makar's errand boys was all I needed to make my happiness complete. But I could always visit my little hidey-hole. And there was the basement office. Clearly no one had busted that open yet. The uninviting sign – "Sanitary Service Solutions" – made it all too obvious there was nothing worth looking for in there. A paper pusher's paradise, no more. At least, that's what's obvious to someone who's never been there before. Whereas I have. I can't say I was a regular visitor, but I did pop in from time to time. True, I don't have a crowbar, but I do have an axe. And some knowledge of the internal set-up of this particular building. If I'd been a little smarter before, I'd have managed without a crowbar. But that's the thing with good ideas, they don't always come exactly when you need them.

Anyway, I don't need to break down the door. Let it stand. There's another way in, from the opposite end of the basement. To get in there, you don't need to break anything. The area inside is reasonably clean, or at least contains an unexceptional amount of the sort of junk and dirt that builds up in all places like that. Also, a fair amount of daylight gets through the little windows, so my progress through the narrow corridors is reasonably quick.

And what is it I'm looking for? There it is – a dark metal box fixed in the wall. At first glance, it appears to be just the sort of thing you'd expect

to find in a place like this. In fact, that's exactly what it is – installed here way back when. However, while once upon a time in the age of a long-forgotten empire it contained only telephone switchboards, nowadays... Well, yes, it's an old communications cabinet for the local telephone network. This is where they used to put them all, before they moved them out onto the street to make servicing easier. Or rather, they installed new, more modern ones outside and left these old things to rot. It was only some considerable time later that some clever sods started to use this one as a way to connect illegally to phone lines. The extensions inside were never fully disconnected – that would have required extra work from somebody... Then there were all sorts of different organizations occupying the building, and the vast majority didn't work at night. That's when you could use their phone lines to connect illegally to the internet. To be absolutely clear, the lines were used by hackers sitting in the very offices I was trying so hard to get into. Although back then, they referred to these "pioneers of the internet" by a very different name.

Time passed, and the hackers grew up a little, found some money somewhere, and gradually abandoned their old habits. It was getting more dangerous, too. The government started making pointed hints. The guys in the office found a more respectable and lucrative activity – money laundering. Obviously, no actual money was brought or stored here. Here was where they cobbled together the laundry systems, enthusiastically and on a grand scale. Tarkov's customs regime meant there was no end to the amount of dirty money that could flow in.

The wire-filled cabinet remained, nonetheless. And nobody, not even the old hands in the office, ever suspected that all that was separating them from the rest of the basement was one metal wall of an old communications cabinet. I, on the other hand, knew all about it – I'd dragged the wires there myself, or at least helped out. It was just one of any number of odd jobs I'd done back in the day. I'd even been a warehouse hand for a while, and fixed and soldered enough mechanisms to make your head spin. Why on earth hadn't I remembered earlier?

The wall of the cabinet led, as you might expect, straight into the office storeroom. Once I was inside, it took a while to get rid of all the dust

and junk I'd gathered on the climb through. I'll have to think of a way of cleaning up in there for the future.

It was dark in the office. The electricity was turned off. Strange somehow, but it seems like someone's choosing where to cut the power and where to leave the lights on. Never mind, there's enough light from the windows to find my way around for now.

I didn't go into the main office, as there was no chance of finding anything interesting there. There's a high turnover of workers here, so very few people have time to settle in properly. But the managers' offices, where I was usually entertained on my visits, might well have something worth searching for.

Standing in the doorway of Vitya's office, I survey the scene in despair. It's as if every law enforcement agency in town, followed by the tax inspector, has had a go at turning the place upside down. If they were originally after documents then it looks very much like the tax inspectors, frustrated at not finding what they were after, just grabbed every little thing they might be able to flog to make up for their losses. The wide open cupboards, desk drawers strewn across the floor, and safe door hanging on its hinges all indicate that the offices were not just abandoned in a hurry, but evacuated like they were on fire. Hmmm, not quite what I was expecting to find here.

I trawl through the office rapidly, but apart from a few packs of cigarettes and piles of paper everywhere, all I find is a single unopened bottle of vodka. That's it. Still, Vitya wasn't the only manager, was he? There are other offices to take a look at. But they weren't much different from the first one, perhaps a little less messy.

I found a few boxes of chocolates, some unopened bottles of cognac, and a couple of cans of beer. Apart from that, just a bunch of useless junk. On a coat stand, I found a bag with a laptop in it. The computer was quite old, but appeared to be in working order. On the other hand, the battery level was very low. Shit, does it mean all that effort to get in here was for nothing?

Vitya was nobody's fool, and I had every reason to think he'd have some useful supplies. Instead I'd found yet more chaos and destruction. Cursing everything, I head back into the main office to see what I can find there.

I'd have been better off not looking. I go back to the boss's office and flop down in his magnificent leather chair. At least that survived the attack. I take a slug of cognac and eat a couple of chocolates, which slightly improve my foul mood.

Shit, so what do I have in the way of reserves. Enough to live on for two or three days, and that's already something. I also have a roof over my head. I doubt very much that anyone will try to break in here any time soon. I should pile all this junk up against the entrance door just in case – I'm not planning to use it, in any event. I'll be coming and going through the cabinet. It's safer that way.

Hang about! I jump out of the chair. What about the leisure room? Vitya always had one. They used to keep the servers in there. Then, when all the hacking business was over, he turned it into a shag pad. How did they ever get such a big bed through the door? In pieces, obviously. Now then, the door should be somewhere round here. I find it quickly enough, but it takes me a whole lot longer to work out how to open it. I didn't want to break it down. Who knows, I might need it sometime? Finally, the bookshelf shifted slightly and silently turned on its hinges. There it is!

Yup, it was a shag pad alright, and a pretty fucking fancy one at that! (If only I could bring that girl here now...) There was a stack of clean bed linen, and several packs of condoms. Vital supplies in the present situation, obviously. Where have all the ladies got to, I wonder? That guy Makar has a few, I guess. I saw bras and other, hm-hmm, items of ladies' toilette hanging on a line to dry. I doubt very much that it's Makar's thugs who wear that sort of thing. On the other hand, how the hell should I know?

There's a vast flatscreen TV taking up half the wall, an *en suite* shower room (with no water), and that's it. Nothing else, unless you count all sorts of gels and creams, and a razor with a packet of blades. Well, at least I'll get the chance to shave – I'm beginning to look a little wild. No

more luck with washing, however, as there's still no water. I'll even have to go outside to piss if I don't want it to start stinking in here.

When it comes down to it, I now have a well disguised lair and a sumptuous bed with a fair supply of clean sheets, a razor, and all sorts of creams and gels. That's it. And the condoms, lest I forget. Made in France, too. Valuable goods, if only I had someone to fence them to.

Hang about! Fencing... Associations began to form in my brain. No, not a plan to take the condoms back home to France (although it's not like I'd turn down the opportunity), but something much more important and real.

Wandering the streets with the gutting crew, I saw several looted shops. And at the time I began to have some doubts on the subject – it seemed like those stores had been stripped out rather too quickly.

How long were we sitting at work completing our urgent project, without any contact with the outside world? Around two weeks. And in that time, had everyone cleverly worked out that they needed to leave town? Far from all of the flats that we gutted looked as if they'd been abandoned in a hurry. And that means people were evacuated. Probably in a reasonably organized manner. So where did the police go? That's an interesting question.

So, the shops were looted, and that was clearly done when there was already no effort by the police to stop it. In other words, not during the official evacuation, when they'd have been even more eager than usual to keep peace and order.

It would take at least two full days to evacuate a city of this size, if not more. But we were working at the Spa for nearly a fortnight! And then I spent a bit longer at home, watching the news on TV. Idiot. Just at the time I should have been hightailing it out of there. Yeah, well... There I was, listening to the newsreaders' fairy tales. Then there was Galperin with his escape plan, and my sleepless night on the stairwell landing next to my tripwired flat...

I remember the first looted shop. By then, they'd had time to strip it bare. You'd guess that the man those two guys in uniform shot was a looter running a little late. But, wait! That was the second shop I came to. The first one greeted me with battened down doors and steel shutters on the windows. Say what you will, but something doesn't fit. All the other shops have been turned inside out, but that one they leave completely intact. At least, from all I could see it hadn't been touched. Didn't look like it had been abandoned, either. I follow the twists and turns of my memories. Wasn't there a sign above the entrance? Something like "Proprietor – A. A. Ogryzko". Or was it A.V.? Does that make any fucking difference? The shop hadn't been raided, and that's all that matters. That means the owner had somehow managed to survive, at least till that moment. And, who knows, he might peek out from behind the shutters one day.

At any rate, I now have an objective – to establish a good business relationship with him. It is a shop, after all. Which means there should even be some food there. And in exchange I've got a rich stock of condoms.

Chapter 3

The shop building has been transformed. Sandbags now cover all the windows, and there are even concrete blocks obstructing the path to the front doors. So, tell me do, who would go to all this effort if they weren't planning to do some sort of business here? The shopfront sign is still hanging above the entrance, even. But there's nobody around. Just the wind skipping down the street, kicking up all sorts of junk.

I listen carefully. I find I'm beginning to trust my ears more and more. People aren't so easy to spot, especially if they don't want to be seen. Hearing them, on the other hand... What did they write in that clever book? "There's no such thing as a silent ambush." That's the Strugatsky brothers... True, nobody's scratching or belching the way they do in the book, but there are other sounds to listen for. Maybe nobody here is rattling chains, but they do shift from foot to foot every now and then.

That's what I hear now – somebody gets impatient and starts moving around. Roughly twenty meters from me. I'm lying on a balcony on the third floor. To get there, I had to come down from the roof. Thankfully, the house is old and the balconies aren't covered. On the other side, there is a fire escape that goes up to the attic, and from there it's simple. So, stomp around for now. Meanwhile, I take out my axe and carefully prise open the balcony door. I've no desire to smash the glass here, it's a nice place. I'd like to keep it for myself. The view is pretty good.

Clearly, I'm no great housebreaker, but then again this isn't Fort Knox. The door squeaked as it was opening, which got a response from the guy stomping round downstairs. He ran up from somewhere, and for an instant I caught a glimpse of him.

Definitely not one of Makar's crew. His clothes are just too shitty. And it doesn't look like he has a gun, either, although that doesn't really mean anything. You can easily hide a pistol in a pocket. And what exactly is he waiting for down there? Doesn't look like he's seriously thinking of robbing or killing somebody. Then again, that's not the sort of intention you go around advertising.

I take a quick look round the flat for anything useful. Jam, stale bread, matches, and three packs of cigarettes which go straight in my bag. I don't smoke, but I can try to trade them for something. And where do I plan to do that? Why, in the shop downstairs, of course! I decide to leave everything else where it is. I could do with the food myself, and I still don't know what the trader downstairs might want.

I hear a scraping sound from down below. I climb up on the windowsill, but nothing's changed down there. I guess the man's given up on waiting. Looks like he's on his way. I'll just give him a minute or two.

A clanging sound as the door of the shop is opened, and out onto the stage comes a new character. One look at him tells you he's the reason the other guy's done a runner. Dressed in full camouflage gear (clearly expensive and imported), with a bullet-proof vest and all sorts of other kit I don't recognize, he's a big, strong guy. The rifle in his hands looks like something out of a sci-fi film, it's got so many accessories bolted on. Well, I'm certainly not going to take that on with my axe. You'd need a machine gun just to get that guy's attention. A big man, and full of self-confidence.

I hear the scrape of the door again, and another similar-looking figure appears, also armed. Have they got an arsenal in there? I move away from the window – they could shoot me from there. But no, I hear their footsteps withdrawing. I perform the same old trick with lock and door, and carefully creep downstairs.

Woah! My feet freeze. There's a thin wire drawn tight across the staircase. A hundred different swear words come into my head as I think of tripwires, mines, and all the related horrors. If it's a tripwire, then it's bound to be connected to something, right? But if I don't touch anything and don't pull on it, then in theory it shouldn't go off. As it turns out on inspection,

there's nothing actually to go off – the wire's attached to an ordinary tin can which has been carelessly stuffed with a bunch of kitchen spoons and forks. Touch the wire and it'll rattle, nothing more. In other words, all we've got here is a jerry-rigged early warning system. Which means?

It means that if someone put it there, they should be near enough to hear it. And maybe they're sitting there now, listening. Perhaps they even live on this very staircase. So let's move carefully. And one more thing...

Seeing as this shop's populated by armed tough guys like the two I've just seen, it doesn't make much sense to go in there showing off my axe. At the very best, all I'll do is make them laugh, and comedy is not the effect I'm going for. As I walk through the archway of the building, therefore, I hide my axe in a pile of rubbish. It may not be much good as a weapon, but it's great for opening doors and windows. That's what I value it as – a tool not a weapon.

I snake between the concrete blocks and stop in front of the door. It wasn't just for decoration before, and now it looks like the front of a safe. The same impression of weight and thickness. I don't see a bell anywhere, and there's no electricity anyway, so I knock and the door resounds thickly under my fist. There's a scrape, and a peephole opens in the door. So that's the sound that guy was running from.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to trade."

"Is that right?" says the invisible voice with surprise. "Well, go ahead and trade. We won't stop you."

And the peephole scrapes shut.

"Hey, maybe I want to buy something from you!"

"Yeah?" Once again the peephole scrapes open, and this time I'm examined more intently. "Step back from the door!"

Apparently I passed the examination, as I hear the bolts being drawn on the other side of the door.

“Come on in.”

Inside, the shop has also been transformed. Now there are grilles on my right and on my left, right up to the ceiling. Behind one of them, there’s a guy slumped in a chair with an assault rifle in his hands. Opposite me stands another guy, unarmed as far as I can tell.

“Spread ’em!” I’m frisked professionally. “What, no weapons whatsoever?”

“What for?”

The guy sniffs and steps to one side, gesturing me forward.

There’s only a small length left of the counter, and even that is all shut off behind thick metal bars. Everything else has been walled over. It’s recent work, I can still catch the smell of fresh plaster.

Behind the counter is a face that I can’t quite place. I know I’ve seen him somewhere before. He’s wearing a wool hat, a warm sweater, and a scarf wrapped round his neck.

“Well?” he says, eying me doubtfully, “what have you got?”

He took a look at my cigarettes and pushed them carelessly to one side – I’d brought six sealed packs with me and one that was half full. The condoms, on the other hand, caused great amusement.

“Now that’s what we’re really after! Selling like hotcakes. What the fuck do you expect me to do with them?”

He slides the pack back across the counter towards me.

“You can keep ’em. Never know when you might need them, eh? What else have you got?”

“What else do you need?”

The shopkeeper laughs.

“We need everything. What exactly do you have?”

“All sorts of clothes.”

A cynical laugh tells me all I need to know.

“Electronics”

The same reaction.

“Look,” he says, nodding at the cigarettes, “I’ll take these. I can give you food and ammo, but not much.”

“I need tinned meat.”

“Two tins! And a pack of hardtack on top.”

I’m in no position to haggle, so I agree to the deal.

“You can bring the same goods again. Water, beer, fizzy drinks – those I’ll take, too. Spirits are always welcome. Can’t imagine what else you’ll find. You’re going through flats, I guess?”

“That, too.”

“Then we’re agreed. Don’t bother with any other junk, and wait till you’ve got a decent weight together. Don’t even think of bringing two or three packs.”

Behind me, I hear the bolts scraping back again. So that’s the end of our business. Fair enough, it’s no loss to me. I don’t smoke so I don’t need the cigarettes. And from what I remember they can be found quite often in the empty flats, so that’s something to work with.

And another thing. There are empty plastic bottles lying around everywhere, and nobody seems much interested in them. Their loss! It took no time at all to get together a couple of dozen containers of all sizes. Now here I am, filling them with water from the pipe. I also found a gas canister with a torch on it, which I use to solder (or stick) the plastic rings left on the bottle necks back onto the sealed tops, matching them by colour. It took a while, but now I'm a dab hand and the results look pretty good. Sure, it's not mineral water. But it's not from the sewer either, at least I hope not. It tastes just like ordinary drinking water, and from what I remember the shopkeeper said there was a market for that.

To let you in on a secret, I couldn't stop myself. I did eventually visit my old home. No, I didn't go into my flat, but I did hang around the doorway for a while. The panes in the windows were unbroken, which meant the nasty surprise left by those arseholes was still there, biding its time. If it had already been tripped, then every pane in the apartment and in the stairwell would've been smashed.

However, I did find my jacket by the burnt-out car. With my knife in one pocket and my water bottle in the other. The bottle goes on my belt, the knife in my pocket, and jacket, which has sadly lost any form of respectability, goes into the bushes. It was scorched, and I didn't want it.

Now the saucepan's full! I pour the water into bottles. I've got just over a dozen already, so I can go see the shopkeeper. I select the most attractive-looking containers – you've got to keep up appearances, and I'm a man of my word. Ten bottles makes fifteen litres, which should be weight enough to satisfy the shopkeeper. I already had a decent backpack, the fruits of another flat-gutting expedition. The bottles fitted perfectly.

So once again I'm standing in front of the familiar shop door. The procedure's the same. I'm frisked by the guard and then I start to put out my bottles on the counter.

"Well," murmurs the shopkeeper, looking at the fruits of my labour, "you did it. Good man!"

The water is removed under the counter.

“What do you want, then?”

“I want to eat! Tins – meat, instant soups, everything!”

Thus, we begin to haggle. After a few minutes, I leave the store and can feel the weight of groceries in my backpack. That’s enough to live on for a few days! With what I’ve salvaged from abandoned flats, there’s really no need to worry for a while.

Slam! My eyes go black for a second.

“Stop right there, you bastard!”

It’s not like I’m about to take off running – that was some smack in the stomach they gave me. I see three wankers of some sort. Surprise, surprise, I know one of them. It’s the same guy who ran away from the two tooled-up gorillas before.

“Are you fucking stupid?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You think you can just walk straight past us?”

There’s something I’m missing. They pull me up on my feet and shove me against the wall, then they explain the balance of power to me, punctuated by a few “friendly” pokes and jabs. Turns out these three represent the shopkeeper’s “protection”, and anyone who wants to do business with him has to slip a little something to them in return for access. Nothing too extravagant, just ten percent of each deal. Hmm, interesting. I wonder if those gorillas in imported camouflage know about this arrangement?

“Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Listen, fool, you’re better off making friends with us. If you fuck about, you’ll pay for it! What’s your address?”

“What address?”

“Not your fucking safe-deposit box, obviously! Where do you sleep?” shouts the biggest of them in my face. Honesty’s the best policy, so I give them my street, building, and apartment number. I say nothing about the office – nobody asked for my business address.

“We’ll be checking.”

“I’d be happy to accompany you gentlemen there right now.”

Like they’ll go anywhere with me. No doubt they’ve got other idiots to wait for.

They’re lying, the bastards! They’re no kind of protection, just street trash. But there are three of them, and they’re stronger than me. Any argument from my side will result in fisticuffs, and I know who’s going to come off worse.

“When you come back, go into that doorway over there. It’s flat seven. There’s a box in the hallway. If none of us are there, that doesn’t mean we’ve left. We guard everything round here, see? So put your stuff in the box. We’ll be checking.”

It’s the same stairwell where I found that jerry-rigged alarm. It’s all a simple shakedown. They hang around outside the shop – or as close as they dare to get for fear of catching a bullet. I doubt the shopkeeper’s guards think much of their activities. Doesn’t mean these arseholes can’t catch me on the way, though. And I’ll get more than a punching if I’m not careful. I know their kind. They don’t give a shit.

My backpack loses much of its weight. I get another slap round the head in the way of goodbye, and get round the corner fast.

So, there’s another Makar round here, too. It’s just a simple racket for now, but soon they’ll get stronger, work out what they’re doing, and attract more scumbags to their ranks. Am I going to have to spend my whole time running away from bastards like this?

If only I was armed, but where am I going to get a gun from? A pocket knife won't be enough to get rid of them. Nor will the axe, for that matter. There's too many of them, and I don't even remember the last time I used it to cut someone. How long ago was it? That's right, never. Do I really plan to start? Not now, certainly.

There is, of course, a chance of finding a gun while I'm gutting flats. But even with a crew the size of Makar's that didn't happen very often. For some reason folks round here don't keep much in the way of arsenals at home. It's hopeless. So, what can I do? Pondering the matter fruitlessly, I drink half a bottle of cognac and slump into Vitya's shagpad.

Something jolts me awake in the middle of the night. I jump out of bed. What's the matter? Something must have woken me, but what? I pace round the room, banging my knees on the vast bed every other step. Fuck-fuck-fuck. That's it! That guy, the one who was killed by the "Bears" in the second shop. He shot at them, didn't he? He did. There was firing that didn't sound like an automatic weapon. And then the bad guys opened fire on him. Though why are they the bad guys? They even threw me a couple of tins of food. Then off they went, and I don't remember seeing any other guns on them but their assault rifles. What would they need anything else for? Which means the dead guy's gun is still there.

It must be lying round there somewhere, but when I get to the shop and look around, I just can't work out exactly where it could have got to. So, let's think logically. My brain seems still to be working more or less.

A shot, followed almost immediately by bursts of fire from the Bears. No screams, sounds of footsteps, or any other noises. Which means they downed him almost immediately, and he dropped dead more or less on the spot. He's still lying there, arms outstretched and beginning to stink.

Let's work on the assumption that most people shoot right-handed. There's no reason to think this guy was any different. Then, when they pumped his chest with at least five rounds, he went straight down where he was standing. Which means his gun must have ended up somewhere over here...

I crouch down and catch sight of a glint of light off the metal of the gun barrel. The gun must have flown under the overturned shelves, and that's why I never saw it. The previous owner had for some reason sawed off the stock, almost all the way to the pistol grip, as I believe they call it. The gun wasn't all that big to start with. You could fit it under a coat, or even a suit jacket, without attracting attention. A semi-sawn-off, I guess you'd call it. Normally, they saw off the barrel. I've seen them in museums. But then you can only fire point-blank, while with the barrel still intact you've got a fair chance of hitting something at up to fifty meters. If you can shoot straight, that is.

I don't know exactly what type of hunting gun it used to be – I'm no expert, after all. But you can let loose down a corridor without even bothering to aim too carefully. You reload it by pulling the piece of wood under the barrel towards you. From the movies again, I know that that makes it a pump-action.

I should take a look at the dead guy, but his pockets have been turned out long before I got there. It was probably those Bears who did it. There's unlikely to be anything left. And I've no great desire to go anywhere near that corpse. The smell is awful, and I'd probably just catch some disease.

The gun was lightly covered with rust. This I noticed once I'd already got it home. Never mind, there's some sunflower oil in the little office kitchen, and that'll do for now. Then I'll find some motor oil in one of the flats and give it a proper greasing. After tinkering around for a while, I manage to strip the gun down. As I thought, the shooter hadn't managed to chamber another round. I pulled an empty cartridge smelling of gunpowder out of the barrel. According to the marking on the bottom, it's a twelve-gauge. That's a big hole – almost two centimetres across. Shit, so how big's a twenty-gauge? You'd need to put it on wheels. Or am I confusing something? I must be, because I remember they used to talk about a twenty-gauge as a ladies' gun. It must be some kind of inverse proportion. As for ammo, there were only three shells. Two of them had a flying duck drawn on the casing, while the third had four zeros stamped on the paper at the tip. So? What does that mean? Which one should I put in first?

Having cleaned off the gun, I put it back together. Turns out it's a lot easier than reassembling a printer after servicing. That's something else I did once upon a time, and it wasn't just printers I fixed, there was some more serious kit as well. I try using the pump-action, pulling the wood under the barrel backwards and forwards. The barrel jumps up.

No, it's not my game. I just can't get the hang of swinging round and aiming quickly. What about those amazing manoeuvres they do in the movies? But then again, that's the movies. Where everybody shoots like a trained sniper. Whereas my doubts in my ability to shoot accurately are well-founded. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to hit a door at ten meters!

For ammo, I'll have to go and see the shopkeeper – he's bound to have some! He must be supplying his guards, which means he's got a store. Or at least he knows where to find some. Which means I'd better start looking for more empty bottles.

So once again I'm back in the basement at the water pipe. I really do need to think of something else. While this water business does stop me dying from hunger, the career prospects are rather limited. How much of this water does the shopkeeper need? And sooner or later even plastic bottles are going to be scarce. Then what? I don't have an answer yet.

When he frisked me this time, the guard showed no surprise at what he found.

"Got yourself a piece, eh?"

"Just a little one," I agree.

There's no point dicking around. I want to be friends with these guys.

"See the box over there?" asks the guard. "Put it in there."

The guy behind the grille with the assault rifle tenses. You never know.

The shopkeeper (whose name, it turns out, is Artemiy) chucks all the bottles into a crate.

“What do you need?”

“Ammunition. Twelve-gauge.”

He purses his lips and looks sceptically at the bottles I’ve brought.

“Well, I can give you a couple of packs. Birdshot or buckshot? I can give you three of those.”

“What about fifty-fifty?”

“What?”

“I mean half of one and half of the other. How many shells in a pack?”

The shopkeeper grins.

“So, you’re a mathematician. Ten shells in a pack. So, a pack of birdshot and...” he thinks for a second, “a dozen of buckshot.”

“Fifteen.”

We agree to fourteen.

In the course of discussion, I discover that buckshot means balls of around four to five millimetres. Considering the large gauge of my gun, that’s more than sufficient for close quarters, but I’m not going to hit anything on the other side of the road unless it’s an elephant.

On my way out, I discover that my not-quite-sawn-off has been unloaded. The shells are arranged neatly beside it.

“In future,” explains the guard, “you do that yourself. If you come in here with a loaded gun, we’ll put you down.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning we’ll blow your fucking brains out, and all that jazz.”

They’re a friendly bunch, aren’t they?

I hide the gun under my jacket and step out into the street. Those thugs that jumped me last time have a lookout post, if that’s what you’d call it, somewhere round here. From there they can see everyone who goes into or comes out of the shop. Now it makes sense why some of the paths to the door have been made so difficult – to ensure everyone approaches the same way. There’s a tree down suddenly on one side, or elsewhere a pile of rubbish has appeared out of nowhere – somehow the bins have turned themselves over. Bins that were never there before anyway. Most people don’t want to climb through a stinking pile of trash, or crawl through the earth under a fallen tree. They’ll take the cleaner, more comfortable path.

So, that’s the deal. There aren’t many of those wankers, and they can’t cover every approach to the shop. That’s how they’ve made their life easier. Where did they meet me last time? Next to that building there. Which means? They saw me, got ready, and jumped straight at me. And one of them did stink a bit, like he’d come from the trash. So, where are they sitting?

Wherever it is, they must also be able to see the flat they told me to take the stuff to. Otherwise they’d have to keep running backwards and forwards. If they see you go in, that means you’re paying your ten percent and everything’s OK. They don’t need to collect the stuff till evening. But if you don’t go in, they have to be ready to catch you.

It’s that building over there. None of the others are as conveniently placed. Elsewhere there are fences in the way. Making holes in them doesn’t make sense. Then anyone could use them and avoid the carefully laid path. The wankers wouldn’t like that.

I wait for a couple of seconds in the cover provided by the wall of the building and the protruding rubbish bin. I quickly put four shells in the magazine, slide the pump (I’ve learned how), and the gun’s loaded.

Five shots. In theory, that's five deaths. If I actually end up shooting. But I know I'm going to have to. There's no good way this ends up. And if they see my gun there'll be all hell to pay. They don't have guns. Well, maybe they have pistols. And I'm sure they've got knives, which no doubt they'll cut me up with to get rid of their fear of an armed man. I've read about how it works. If they did have a gun, then they'd have waved it round under my nose already. For the sake of good form, as they say, and for greater persuasion. They'd have made me sniff it.

I loosen the strap I'm holding the gun with slightly, wrapping it in a loop around the round cover of the magazine. My shotgun sling (that's the proper name for it, a shotgun sling!) is pretty new, with plastic buckles that can easily be adjusted. If you slip the loop from the magazine, the shotgun drops out from under my coat and hangs on a long strap, which makes it easy to handle. Sadly, this isn't my invention, it's something else I saw in a film. True, they did it with submachine guns there, but what's the difference? It's not very comfortable, so you can't go far with it, but then I don't have to.

And here's the entryway I was told to bring my offering to in return for their so-called protection. To be fair, they've chosen the place pretty well. No need to make a special detour.

As I come inside, I unfasten my jacket and carefully step over the wire of their alarm system. It's still in the same place. There's no point announcing my presence too early. Even more so as I'm coming up the stairs and not down, and the tripwire's designed to catch someone coming down from upstairs.

The apartment turns out to be empty. Nobody's bothered to wait for me. You'd guess the wankers have worked out that it may not only be conscientious payers that want to come in here. There really is a box in the kitchen, and right now it's completely empty. Either they've already collected their bounty, or nobody's brought them anything yet. Not all of the shopkeeper's customers can be so helpless that they have to pay those arseholes off. I'd like to see them try to shake down those armed gorillas. In fact, I'd pay anything for it. I look into the neighbouring room and find what I need. I drag out a writing desk and use it to block the doorway to the

kitchen. I also turn the kitchen table around. Now, in order to get from the hallway into the kitchen, they'll have to get through my obstacle course, which isn't easy as I've left only the tiniest gap. I then leave the apartment and go back out on the street, and turn in completely the opposite direction from the way I went last time, just to make sure no one intercepts me on the way home. They should have seen my visit to the apartment, and that means there'll be somebody along soon to pick up my payment.

As I now more or less know the way, I make my journey considerably more quickly than the time before. It helps that the fire escape is completely out of sight from where I assume their lookout post to be. It's wide open from the other side, however, so it's best to get up fast. Across the roof, onto the familiar balcony, and through the apartment to the staircase without incident. Slipping cautiously into the kitchen, I take up position in the corner so I that I can't be seen from the street. Just in case. I sit and wait. It's a shame I don't smoke, or the time might pass a little faster. I can't snooze, and it's not a good idea to relax too much.

So, will the courier be here soon? If my calculations are correct, he should be along any minute. At some point in my checkered career, I worked in logistics and had to organize all sorts of things. You get used to assessing a huge variety of factors, among them the walking speed of a courier on foot. So I do have some reason to believe my estimates are reasonably accurate.

And there's the scrape of the door downstairs! Who'll be the lucky first visitor? Well, I really couldn't have hoped for better! Standing in the doorway is none other than the original lookout I saw from the balcony on my first visit. I've got a bone to pick with you, my friend.

"Waaaaa?" He clearly wasn't expecting to find anyone here, and voices his confusion.

"Sit down!" I nod towards the floor.

"What the fuck?" shouts the little tit.

And then he notices the shotgun poking pointedly out from under the table.

He really is a little tit, too. Skinny and unkempt. You'd think he'd just be a hanger-on in most groups, but he's trying to puff out his chest. You can see why, too. A dickhead like that will have spent all his life being kicked around – sent off to buy beer, cigarettes and girls. Then suddenly he gets to be the one shouting orders, and he's got friends at his back to stop him getting punched in his ugly face. He must have liked the feeling, and decided that he was born to rule after all. Now suddenly he was being knocked back into his customary cringing position. He didn't like it one bit.

"What do you think?" starts the wanker, still holding out hope.

Well, he should be a little more observant, shouldn't he? Hasn't he noticed there's a chopping board right next to me on the table? It's a good old-fashioned one, made of thick wood. Very comfortable to cut on. A useful thing in all sorts of ways. Easy to throw, too. So, when the heavy piece of wood hits our dickhead right in the middle of his ugly face, he finally stops talking. All that time playing table tennis turned out to have a use after all – it was a good, powerful throw with a good, powerful effect. The guy choked up, and all the words he was planning to let fly in my direction remained stick in his throat.

"Did anyone give you permission to talk?" I ask sweetly. I borrow the manner from our old HR director, who always kept a calm, pleasant tone. He knew what he was doing. It sounds like you're being polite, but it's very difficult to argue with.

The dickhead says nothing, just wipes the blood from his split lip. Sensible of him. Also standing on the table is an iron. It's old, too, the sort made from actual iron. Get hit with that in the chops and you really won't be saying anything. Ever again.

"Speak out of line again, and I'll shoot you in the fucking kneecaps. Then I'll leave you here, and by the time your friends come running to find you'll have bled out all over the floor. Nod if you understand!"

I shout the last words at the top of my voice, and see the dickhead shudder before he nods. Even I'm afraid of what I'm saying. Afraid because I really am going to have to do all that. It may be easy to pull a trigger in the movies, but what's it like in real life? So that's why I'm shouting, to get my own nerve up.

"Where are your mates?"

"Not far. Number ten on Karpov Street."

"Flat number?"

"Sixteen."

I know the building. There used to be a shop on the ground floor. So, the bad guys are up on the fourth floor. Makes sense, there's a pretty good view from there.

"How many of them?"

"Two."

"The ones who were with you last time?"

"One of them – Big Misha. Valera stayed at the base."

Ah, so they have a base. That's worth knowing.

"Where's your base and how many people there?"

Gabbling and mixing his words, the dickhead hurries to tell me everything he knows. Why's he got so much to say, and why so loud?

"Quiet now! Keep your mouth shut. If you even yawn, you're fucked!"

Something's not right here. Sure, he's frightened, and there's still blood flowing from his split lip, but that's no reason to make so much noise.

I move further back into the corner and bring my gun to the ready. The front door is slammed open with a crash, hitting the wall so hard that there's a shower of plaster and dust from above. Two male figures appear in the doorway.

Bam! It's quite something. I mean, of course I've seen people fire shotguns before. I've even fired one myself. Out hunting. In the open air. Not in the narrow hallway of somebody's flat. It's not the same effect at all.

The pane of the window behind me shatters loudly – presumably from the sound of the charge. There's a whistling noise as buckshot ricochets off the walls – the first shell was buckshot, just to make sure there was plenty to go round.

There was plenty. Blood's streaming from the wanker's face, and it looks like he caught some shot. One of the new arrivals is pressed against the wall, hit in the shoulder. No more fight from him, his right arm's hanging like a ribbon. The third guy I can't see, or at least not all of him. Just his legs. The round knocked him back out onto the landing. Or did he drop down himself. Either way, his legs are only twitching slightly. Is he dead? Fuck!

Gradually the sound returns to my ears, and the smoke drifts outside with the breeze. I'm in shock, but you've got to assume it was worse for the others. The barrel was pointing their way, after all. Their ears would have got the worst of the sound, too. Shit!

I pull at the wood under the barrel to chamber another round. I'd be a real idiot to let them jump me now. From what I can see, however, they've shat themselves. The wanker's lip is trembling, and then he starts to sob out loud. You can't blame him. He's had a wooden board smashed in his face and barrel of buckshot straight past his head. I'd have shut down completely, I guess.

"Get down on the ground!"

Both of them drop so fast the floor shakes.

I stand up and lean sideways to look at the front door. I can't see shit, just the legs of the guy lying there. The bastard's still alive – his legs are twitching violently.

"Hey, you! Pull your friend inside."

The guy with the injured shoulder nods with fear – sure, sure. With his good hand he grabs a boot and drags the guy on his back into the cover of the hallway.

Fucking hell! His whole chest's been ripped open! His prospects don't look great.

"Are you armed?"

"I've got a knife," the wounded guy says hoarsely.

"Slit his throat, then throw the knife over here on the floor!"

If someone ordered me to do that, I doubt that I could manage it. Sliding a knife across the throat of a living human being... no, I couldn't do it. But if you can't do it yourself, get someone else to! That was our company motto back in the army, as I remember. And if this guy has any reservations, he doesn't show them. He finishes off his friend with a single cut. Not fun to watch, but the knife came clattering across the floor.

"Right," I say hoarsely. I'm finding it hard to talk, but I guess for the bad guys my croaking sounds scary enough. At any rate, the two of them flinch when I speak.

"I don't want to see your faces round here again, ever! Understood? Otherwise..." I look meaningfully towards the door. "Any questions?"

They both shake their heads, almost in tempo.

"Turn out your pockets!"

All sorts of crap falls out onto the floor. Huh, the wanker had another knife stuck in his belt.

“You fucker!” The words came out with some feeling. “I should have shot you straight away! Be grateful for my good nature.”

The two of them vanished into thin air.

Among the junk they left behind was a pretty good knife. I’ll keep that. It’s certainly better than my pocket knife. Some hardtack and a couple of tins of food. Not too bad.

I move over to the third member of the merry band. So, then, what did they call you? Big Misha, wasn’t it? Well, size didn’t help you here. It wasn’t what I’d planned, and I can’t say I wanted to shoot you to be honest. That’s just how it went down. The door slammed open, and my finger twitched automatically. It just so happened that my finger was on the trigger at the time. Basically, it’s bad luck, old boy. But then I find he has a revolver in his pocket. Not such bad luck after all, at least for me.

I hear movement, turn to my right, and I’m looking at the black hole of a gun barrel. It’s the shopkeeper’s regular guard. He’s calm and composed, holding his gun with confidence, unlike some of us.

“And there was me wondering who was making all that noise.” He examines the body on the floor with interest. “Who’d have thought?”

The automatic rifle twitches slightly, showing me where to move to.

“And put the gun on the floor. Just in case.”

I do as he says. This is a guy I have no desire to quarrel with – he’s too far out of my weight class. He’d put me down without blinking.

The guard even crouches down to look at the dead guy.

“So, you shot him then finished him off with the knife. You’re a beast!” He glances at the open door of the flat. “And it looks like you got someone else here. How come I don’t see any more bodies? Eaten them already?

“I let them run. The fear will follow them for the rest of their lives.” I really believe that’s true. All I need to do is picture myself in their place.

“So, you’re a psychologist,” says the guard with respect. “Seriously, I wouldn’t have thought of that. What did you used to be?”

“A system administrator. I had to make sure everything was running smoothly.”

“Hmm. My work was simpler than that. Anyway, have a seat.”

I sit straight down on one step of the staircase. The guard makes himself comfortable in the doorway of the flat, his automatic rifle on his knees. Shit, there’s a corpse lying right next to the guy, and he’s not bothered. The man’s got nerves of steel!

“What’s your name?”

“Denis.”

“Well, I’m Pavel. They also call me Sledgehammer sometimes.”

Looking at his hands, I can see it’s a nickname that suits him. Basically, with fists like that he doesn’t really need the gun as well.

“Basically, Denis, I’m not going to fuck you around. I’ve got a simple proposition for you.”

I make every effort to show my sincere interest. It’s not like I can tell this guy to go fuck himself.

“As I’m sure you understand, we really don’t need this kind of mess around the shop. Nobody’s getting to us, but when people are being shot up and cut up in the area, it’s not great for business either. Our customers might decide to look elsewhere.”

“I understand,” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “To be honest, I wanted to resolve this without bloodshed, too.”

Sledgehammer gives an ironic glance at the ripped wallpaper and the bloodstains on the floor.

“That’s exactly what I thought. Anyway, here’s the thing – if you agree, this little spot of bother’s yours to deal with. You make sure everything stays quiet round here. Any trouble, and it’s on you. You’ll be letting me down.”

“Understood. But what do I get out of it?”

“What you do with these fuckers,” he nods towards the dead body, “that’s your business. Strip them down to their pants, that’s up to you. And you’ll be on good terms with us. We’ll give you discount rates and throw in some ammo. There’ll be more, too. But nothing up front. You’ll get paid for the work you do.”

“What counts as work done?”

“Come round in a week, and we’ll chew it over. But bear in mind you’re not the only one who could do the job.”

He stands up and straightens his gun.

“Don’t follow me. Sit here for another five minutes.”

Does he really think I’m dumb enough to run after him and try to jump him on the street? He’d shoot me down without blinking. For him, pulling the trigger’s like taking a piss.

I gather up my weapons and trophies, and make my way up to the top floor and the already familiar flat. I lock the door behind me and sit down on the couch. What am I going to do? Looks like my water-bottling business has gone belly up. Am I going to fight a whole gang on my own? It’d be simpler just to top myself right now. No inspiration comes to mind. Meanwhile, my hands play mechanically with my new revolver. It’s not a real revolver, it’s a gas-powered pellet gun. Imported, by the look of it. And with only four pellets. The stuff I took from those arseholes will last for two or three days. I’ve got nothing to take to the shopkeeper anymore. He’s not

interested in my water now, Pavel made that pretty clear. Quite possibly, they may have noticed my "artistry" with the bottle tops. Then they make me an offer I can't refuse. It's no loss to them and, as they say, there's plenty more like me who'll do the job if necessary.

I'm in the shit! How long have I been sitting here? The two guys who ran out of here with their tails between their legs could have split up. One might have run back to their gang, and the other might be sitting somewhere nearby. In their lookout post, for example. He'd have seen Sledgehammer come and go. He'd have seen that I'm still here. They could be back for me any second!

The door's locked. I rush to the balcony and cautiously look over the area. After all, I saw where the wanker was hanging about before. No, for now there's nothing to see.

I can't go up from here, it's the top of the staircase. But I can slip down to the lower floors. Even this washing line, if it's doubled or tripled up, will be enough to hold me.

But where could those dirty sods be waiting? Wrong question. First off, there's only one dirty sod, the other's run off to get help. Second, he's almost certainly holed up somewhere he can see the entryway. After all, that's how I came in and out, and there's no reason for them to think that I'll be going any other way. After Pavel's visit, they may well assume that I'm working with the shopkeeper. It would only be natural for me to move in somewhere nearby, even if only for a while, and this block would be a perfectly good choice.

Talking of which, I don't have a clue how many other people this gang had time to get to, but there could be quite a few. Five or six at least. I doubt they'd have managed to make themselves known to many more – not enough time's passed. I doubt the shopkeeper has a huge client base, but a gang like that can always scare a lone shopper. Following their bandit logic, there's no way I could let those shoppers, or at least the payment they bring, go by. So I'd be sitting in that very flat, waiting for the fish to come.

What? It all makes perfect sense. Shopkeeper Ogryzko appears to be working with me, so I could rely on some assistance from his guards. That's if the situation goes on long enough to get serious. They really could provide me with cover fire. From a distance, obviously. The shopkeeper's not going to send his guards into battle. But even that sort of help could be very useful. It's only eighty meters to the shop, and an assault rifle at that distance can sweep everything clean. At least, that's what the bandits might think. Unfortunately, I know the truth of the matter – there isn't going to be any help.

I need to leave.

My path is clear – down to the second-floor balcony, then down again, and from there down to the ground. Once I'm down on the street, I tug the line, roll it up, and hide it in a pile of some kind of junk. Where does it all come from, I'd like to know? Nothing, nothing, then suddenly a whole pile. Miraculous.

But I don't have time for miracles and wonders right now. There's a blunt question before me – what to do next?

At least they're not going to catch me on the stairs now. Which also means I'm following Pavel's instructions to keep the peace. There won't be any shootout. Which is a good thing for me.

Yup, that's exactly right. It's obvious to me what the outcome would be. I need to get out of here. Where to? Back to my basement, where else?

That means at the very least that the shopkeeper's now closed for business as far as I'm concerned. He won't want to deal with me anymore. They'll probably entrust the work to those arseholes, and I'll be a prime target for them.

Which doesn't suit me. "So what?" asks my inner voice with a smirk. "If it doesn't suit you, what are going to do about it?" That's the question.

Wait a second! I had a flash of an idea somewhere at the very back of my brain. What was it? Something like... Wait, let's go back to the

beginning. Right now, those bastards are on their way here to turn that stairway upside down, but they won't find anything. What next? Well, I did give them my address. And at least two people who are still very much alive and very angry with me heard it. They may not remember all the details, but they'll probably find the right building. And we all have our names on our postboxes – surname and initials. I may not have told them my surname, but they heard my first name. Which means they'll work out which flat's mine. Well, fuck them, to be honest. I haven't been able to go back there for ages anyway.

Then I sat down. Right there where I was standing. Straight down on the tarmac. I can't go back there – and neither can anyone else! Whether it's a mine or a grenade they put there, it doesn't give a flying fuck who exactly opens the door. It'll great anyone with open arms.

My head was spinning with excitement. Would they all go there? Probably not. Someone has to stay and watch this stairway. They'll want to bury their dead comrade, although that may be giving them too much credit. They won't just throw him in a ditch, but I doubt there'll be much in the way of speeches and ceremony. Still, they'll dig a hole for him somewhere.

Let's assume they leave a few guys here to keep watch, and the rest of them head for my home. It's not too far to go. There aren't that many of them, either. After I hit him with the chopping board, the wanker gave me the number – fourteen. That's thirteen now, by the by. Unlucky for some. And at least one of them's injured – the guy who used his good hand to cut his friend's throat. He didn't even wince, come to think of it. So, that makes twelve of them. Two groups of six, that's the best I can hope for. Even then, it's really not the ideal situation. But then I really don't have a choice. None at all. Either I die of hunger, or I get myself killed in a firefight with those wankers. One way or the other...

Chapter 4

Home sweet home! I never did finish paying off my mortgage. If Tarbank wants to try and chase me down for back payments now then to hell with them. It's not like I can live here anymore.

The windows are still in one piece. On all the floors. That means the wire hasn't been tripped yet. This raises the question – should I go inside or what? If I don't go in, I'll be able to see when anyone arrives. It seems highly unlikely they'll be coming by car. And if I'm sitting up stairs, even if I'm not on my own landing, I still may catch some of the blast. I don't know about shrapnel, but they say the blast wave itself is a pretty scary thing. I'd be gaping silently like a dormant fish. So, no, I won't be going inside. Sod that. I'll keep watch on the street.

I was waiting for a long time. For some reason, the bandits weren't rushing to catch me at home. Had they forgotten my address? Anything's possible, and maybe it's not such a bad thing. After all, the shopkeeper can't be the only one in town, and there are still vast numbers of empty flats to look through. I'll survive for a good while yet. It's not like I need all that much to keep me going. Even if they start gutting the flats much more quickly, they can't do them all at once. I can always up sticks and move to some other neighbourhood. It's not like I have pets to worry about, nor do I have any other dependents or friends that need feeding.

"Sure," says the snide voice in my head, "you go ahead and move. And where exactly are you going to find these other shops? Look them up online, will you? Or is there a noticeboard somewhere? Where's that exactly? It doesn't seem all that likely that there are huge numbers of shopkeepers like that."

It’s all true. Even if I stay right where I am in my basement, sooner or later someone will notice me on the street. They’ll follow me back home, throw some burning shit through the window, and then I’ll come running out, half blind and gasping from the smoke. I’ll be lucky if they kill me straight away. Or I might not even get that far, just choke to death in the basement.

Shit, my prospects really don’t look all that good. I don’t want this!

Ah, well, I remember there was something else I didn’t want not so long ago. Did it make any difference to those bandits? They’re looking for me now. Odds on they’ve turned that staircase upside by now. They won’t forgive me.

But what if I come to a deal with them? I show them my basement, hand over my gun. They won’t kill me right there, will they? But implacable logic tells me there’s no chance. They will kill me, and if it’s straight away I’ll be lucky. It could turn out to be a whole lot worse than that.

There’s no way out of it.

Sure, Tarkov’s not a small town. But you can’t call it a big city either. I don’t know the other parts of it, I’ve always lived here. This is my home. There’s no guarantee I’ll be met with open arms in another neighbourhood. Another Makar, another barracks. No, thanks.

I turn awkwardly and curse wildly with pain. Some piece of iron has spiked me painfully in the leg, right through my trousers. That’s what comes of hanging round in all this junk! Suddenly my confusion is replaced by fury. They want to kill me! And not just shoot me, they want to make a whole song and dance out of it. So, one corpse isn’t enough for you, eh? Then there’ll be another! I do have a gun too, you know. And I know how to use it, as some of you may have noticed already.

“But can you really shoot at a living human being? Not accidentally pull the trigger, but consciously and decisively? Wanting to kill someone, to

see their hot blood splash onto the tarmac? Can you watch calmly as they die, killed by your hand?"

Yes, actually, I can!

When you're playing a computer game and you shoot an avatar, you don't give much thought to the fact it's being controlled by a living person. Think of these guys as avatars. They may look real, but do they really have a soul? Could a real person be that cynical and shameless?

"Yes, they can," points out the same voice inside my head. "Of course, they fucking can."

Maybe I could just give this all up, find myself an even deeper basement. This nightmare has to end at some point surely. This sort of thing can't go on for ever in the modern world.

I need to leave, and right now!

I jump to my feet, and then carefully settle back into my previous position. Coming round the building, from a completely different direction than the one I expected, is a group of people. Dressed any old way, of different ages, but all with exactly the same expression. Or did I just imagine that? Probably. I'm sitting a fair distance from them. I do see that two of them have guns more or less like mine, but then all guns look much the same to me. Two of them are armed with baseball bats. As one of our famous sports commentators once said: "There's not a single baseball pitch in the country, yet every month we import whole shiploads of baseball bats!" Then there's one more with nothing at all – might as well have his hands in his pockets. Is that the lot?

Hmmm, I was expecting them to take me a little more seriously. Somehow it feels like a lack of respect. "Aha, I guess you thought they'd send a whole regiment after you!" That voice inside my head can be a real dick sometimes.

The group is marching purposefully straight towards the entryway. There's only one in the building, so it's hard to miss. Still, they might walk

past it. No doubt they've got other things to do as well.

They didn't. They slam the entrance door behind them, not leaving anyone outside on the street. True, there is a small chance they've simply come to loot one of the flats. Which means they're going to break down a steel door with their bare hands, does it? Nearly all of them are steel, except mine and two more like it on the first floor.

For some reason, I didn't hear the explosion. Instead, I saw the glass suddenly come flying out of my windows, showering the courtyard and the nearby alley with a glittering rain. I couldn't understand what had happened.

The noise came after, echoing off the surrounding buildings like rolling thunder. It was like a truck dropping a load of empty boxes onto the pavement.

Ba-ba-ba-boom. The neighbourhood birds squawked in terror, jumping from their perches. Dogs barked nervously, then all was quiet.

Is it over? It can't be. What the hell did they put in there?

It's not over. The door scrapes open, and one of the visitors appears in the doorway. Weirdly, his face is covered in something white. He's holding his shoulder. He takes a few hesitant steps forward, and then he sees me. Why the hell did I come out from my hiding place? The guy, who're really quite young, opens his mouth. Did he say something or just scream? I can't tell. But the gesture he made was more than clear enough. He turns back towards the door.

Is he going for help? What else would he be doing? Now he'll go and get the others. He's wounded, maybe they sent him outside to rest.

I raise my shotgun – somehow it was already in my hands. He's getting away!

"He's injured."

That he is, but he's on his way to get his perfectly healthy bandit friends!

"It's a living human being!"

It's an avatar!

My finger squeezes the trigger. At this range it's hard to miss, particularly with buckshot. I didn't miss. The boy's legs went from under him and he slumped gently to the floor. Dead? Probably. At this range the buckshot will go through any clothing, and all he's wearing is a cloth jacket.

Shit! I've done it again. That's the second time I've killed a man. That's if you count the guy I jumped on from the landing window as the first. But what about the guy who got his throat cut? That wasn't me, that was his bandit friend!

"But you ordered him to do it, didn't you?"

I don't even have time to think of an answer to that before the door swings open again. The guy who comes out this time doesn't seem quite so helpless. He's wounded – there's blood streaming down his face. But it doesn't seem to have affected his abilities much. Something whistles past me unpleasantly. In the movies, I've seen any number of times how the hero makes amazing leaps to avoid bullets. Well, maybe there's a special technique they teach the actors, and that's why it all looks so pretty. I've never been an actor, never got the lesson, and so I don't jump anywhere. "Run fast and you'll die tired." I don't remember where that comes from, but I've heard that expression before. You can't outrun a bullet, and I've no doubt whatsoever that someone just fired at me. This time I remembered to pull on the wood under the barrel in good time, so all I have to do now is squeeze the trigger. The round goes off with an unexpected blast.

Pull again and squeeze again. And again. My ammo's finished – the shotgun only holds four rounds. But then, my opponent's finished, too. Or at least his attempts to kill me are. Knocked sideways, he squirms on the tarmac. He's still alive, but judging by the rich and varied stream of obscenities spewing from his mouth, he was hit hard. I guess it must hurt.

I stand still. Rummaging in my pockets, I pull out more bright-red shells and hurriedly reload my not-quite-sawn-off.

Where's the bandit's gun? It's on the ground over there – a pistol. The kind the police normally carry. Is this guy one of them? Looking like that and with his rich vocabulary? It seems hard to believe somehow. I step around the guy and pick up the pistol. Where am I going to put it? Hang on, the hammer's pulled back. I'm not a complete moron, I do know something about guns. Pressing with my thumb, I release it carefully. OK, now I won't be shooting myself in the leg. I can take a calmer look at the scene around me. Apparently, the effects of the blast had gone to the shooter's head, and that's why he missed me. Plus, he was shooting with a pistol. If you're an inch off target, you might as well not bother pulling the trigger. The head of security in our office used to love taking members of staff shooting at the target range. True, for some reason he used to prefer taking the girls, especially the pretty ones. I heard that expression from one of them.

Anyway, the shooter did miss. Perhaps by no more than an inch. Then I fired my shotgun. With buckshot. And as I already knew from back in that flat, it had some scatter on it. An inch or two either way won't make the blindest bit of difference.

"Fucker!" shouts the injured guy. "I'm going to cut you to shreds!"

Seems unlikely. I've no intention of giving our friend a knife any time soon. A bandage or a rag of some sort, that I might consider. Although he was trying very hard to kill me.

"Take that, you fucker!"

He jerks suddenly, and I see a glinting strip of metal flash in my direction.

Shit! I jump back entirely on reflex, and the sharp pain in my leg makes me cry out. My finger already squeezes the trigger from force of habit. You shouldn't have done that, friend. I didn't want to hurt you.

I fired at close range, didn't I? Point-blank, you could say. I really have no desire to look at the consequences. Still, the guy was being a pain in the arse.

The knife sliced the leg of trousers bad enough that I'll have to throw them out. Then the sharp blade swept across my leg, leaving a significant and very visible slice just above my knee. There's blood coming, of course, and plenty of it. I could die from that, mind. Whether I want to or not, now I have to go back into my flat – to get my first-aid kit. Otherwise I'll just bleed out. I'm not some movie hero who can fight for hours while generously pouring my blood onto the tarmac.

I need to reload the gun – I've had enough of these surprises!

The breach clicks again. This time I've been a little more cunning. After chambering a round in the barrel, I slot another into the magazine – now I've got five shots rather than four. That'll be a surprise for somebody, and not a pleasant one. The guys inside will have heard the shots, and they know what their friend was armed with. It's therefore not hard to see where this showdown's going. They'll be waiting for me right by the entrance. But they'll be disappointed...

Hobbling on my wounded leg (it hurts!), I circle the building. There's one more entrance here – through the garage. I don't have a car, but all residents were given a garage key. Me included, and I haven't lost it yet. Not one of the many people who has searched me recently has shown the slightest interest. Maybe because it doesn't look much like a key. It's just a little metal tab with indentations and projections. It was hanging on my belt loop, and looked so simple and insignificant that nobody gave it a moment's thought.

Crouching on the stairs, I hastily bind my wound with a piece ripped off my shirt. I make an unholy mess of it, but it's still better than nothing.

I move down the access ramp. There's a small door to the left of the entry gates. That's where the key fits. The lock was well-oiled at some point, and the key turns almost soundlessly. It hardly matters anyway. The door's in the basement so no one's going to hear anything.

It’s dark in the garage, but in the beam of light that falls through the doorway I can see that there almost no cars left. That Ford has been standing there for a year already – the owner’s in prison. There’s Lena’s Mazda. She’s in Spain right now. She was working as a customs broker, so she always had money for holidays. Shit, it’s painful to realize that all your neighbours managed to escape successfully, while you’re left like a fool in the burning ruins.

The lift’s not working, which comes as no surprise. Before I start up the staircase, I take off my boots, tie the laces together and hang them over my shoulder. Fuck knows what’s going to happen next, but I really don’t want to be running round barefoot. In socks, my footsteps seems to be quieter than my breathing.

In the hallway, light comes through the window and I see there’s no one here. The niche where I hid out is empty. Excellent.

On to the first landing. Also empty.

The second landing. Woh! There’s blood on the floor here. And a hand print on the wall. The two smart-arses downstairs had fairly clean hands, definitely not covered in blood. And it didn’t look like either of them was bleeding on the floor, either.

Which means? Means there’s a third one alive. He got hit, stumbled downstairs, then he heard the shots and worked out who had the winning hand. So he drew back. He doesn’t want me to see him. He’s hoping to see me first, and I can guess why.

Stop! What’s this on the left? A door, slightly ajar. An interesting family used to live there – not poor and very, very pleased with themselves. So much so that they bought two flats on adjoining floors and joined them together with a staircase inside. Why? Who the fuck knows, to show off, I guess. At one point I helped to sort out their electrics, so I spent some time in their mini-mansion. They paid well, too.

I turn left.

The doors really aren't locked, just pulled to. I slip quickly into the flat, holding my gun ready before me. You never know, what with so many smart-arses around. Once inside, I notice a nasty smell in the flat. A stench, I think it's fair to say. Still, I'll choose a nasty smell over the chance of putting my head straight into someone's sights. I carefully close the latch – now no one can follow me inside. I doubt that anyone's going to be hiding in a place with a stench like this, but just in case I keep my gun at the ready.

Through one room and into the next. There's no one there. Now up the staircase. I find the owner's body at the top, lying right next to the steps. The scorched holes in his back give a lyrical explanation of the nasty smell. He was killed a while back, and now he stinks. They shot him with something serious, too. Out of the corner of my eye I see the open door of the bathroom, and somebody's hand hanging over the edge of the Jacuzzi. So, there's the mistress of the house.

The flat shows signs of being searched hurriedly. So that's why they had to deal with the owner that way – they wanted to find out where everything was hidden. Right now that's not so important, however. The owner has a pretty good uninterruptible power supply, which should keep the alarm and CCTV system working. I installed it myself, so I should know. There's the monitor on the wall, but it's not working. The system's switched off.

Interesting. What about the UPS, then? Well, good equipment's still good equipment, whatever else may have changed. The monitor flashes on, showing icons for the different systems working. The doors are closed, so the alarm is silent. I now turn it off.

Say what you will, but my ingrained habit of closing doors behind me served me well here, too. Otherwise the alarm system would have made a dreadful row and announced my presence. The siren stays silent.

Now for the cameras, of which there are several. We don't need the garage for now, and the first floor is also of no interest – that's where I've just come from. On to the second floor. Nobody there? But wait, who's body is that, and why's it here? Did someone drop him right there?

There really is a body lying motionless on the landing. Dead, clearly. You couldn't lie long in such an awkward position. But there's also one more, and I'm not quite so sure he's left the land of the living. Would a corpse really be holding its gun ready and occasionally peaking out from behind its dead comrade? So, what happened is this guy heard the shooting outside, quickly had a little think, then dragged his dead colleague down from upstairs and used him to make a sort of shield. You have to hand it to the dude – getting a bullet through a corpse is possible, I'm sure, but what use would it be? By the time his opponent has worked out why his shots aren't getting him anywhere and changed his aim, he'll have been killed three times over. It's not my place to cast judgement on the moral qualities of these thugs, but even so I think it's fair to say we're not dealing with graduates of the finest universities. I don't know if I could use my comrade's body in a similar manner, but it doesn't look like the guy lying there gave it a moment's thought. Cold hard calculation is all I can see evidence of.

So, let's assume that's how this guy ended up where he is. As far as covering the staircase goes, he's got it all pretty well worked out. He can see plenty, while it would take a while to notice him. But from the position of the camera, and hence from the position of the door I'm now standing behind. he's not covered at all. The camera looks out onto the landing from right here – it was installed just to the right of the door, in order to give a view of the door itself and anyone who might be in front of it. If I open the door quickly, the bad guy won't have any time to take evasive action.

Where the hell do these thoughts come from? I'm just a normal guy, and here I am calmly considering how best to shoot another human being. But then, it's not like he's waiting for me with tea and cakes, is it?

He's not a human being.

He's an avatar.

A soulless humanoid form, nothing more.

I check again that the alarm's off – it is. I check my shotgun, and stand it next to the door. I take out the pistol and go downstairs. We open

the door on the first floor, making sure to secure the chain first – it's not like I'm the only one who can come and go this way, so let's not leave it wide open to other visitors. Am I ready? I make a pyramid of chairs. Now, if somebody wants to come in here, the furniture will tumble and make quite a noise. So no one's going to creep up this way and take me by surprise. My idea is simple as a nun's prayer. Now I go and activate the system, and then the alarm starts to shriek downstairs. The bad guy is distracted by the noise, I slam open the door, and it's curtains for him. You might even call it elegant.

However, real life has confounded better plans than that. A shot suddenly rings out on the landing and somebody starts shouting, providing a scathing critique of all the shooter's family and friends. I jump to the monitor, grabbing my shotgun on the way. I'm terrified, but on the screen I see a fascinating spectacle. Several guys of now familiar appearance are shaking my cunning opponent by the chest. Face down on the stairs just below the landing there's one more visitor, apparently the most unlucky.

So, reinforcements have arrived.

What I'm probably looking at is the group that went to search the building near the shop. When they didn't find anything (which must have seemed strange, to say the least), they quite reasonably made their way here. And that cunning sod, hearing the footsteps he'd been waiting for on the stairs, opened fire on the first guy to reach the landing. Judging by the position of the guy lying down, it was a pretty good shot. Now the comrades of the recently deceased are expressing their discontent with the hapless shooter. Quite right, too! They may yet save me some ammo.

Or not. Sadly, they decide against smashing his face into the wall. They're heading downstairs, and one of them has even had time to dash upstairs and bring some stuff down. Clearly stripped from the corpses of his partners – I don't have any shotguns in my flat, and this guy's carrying two.

So, are they just going to walk out of here? On the one hand, that's fantastic! And yet... they've already gone through my flat, and taken everything of any value out of there. They're bound to have grabbed my first-aid kit. Fool that I am, I put that together with love, packed it in a

special backpack, and hung it in a prominent position. I was so savvy, I kept up-to-date with all the latest medical developments online, and got hold of new remedies when necessary. On hiking expeditions, my little case was always the centre of attention. Somebody would overdo it on the vodka and end up with the runs, and my first-aid kit would have the answer for that or any number of other problems. I even had sanitary towels in it, for which our girls had awarded me respectful glances more than once. Now all of that was hanging on the back of some thieving arsehole. Sure, I could start looking for replacements here, but I was already going crazy from the stench of dead bodies.

The prospect of bleeding out among all these corpses doesn't appeal.

Then I hear a commanding voice on the staircase: "Go downstairs and get some petrol. There must be some cars in the garage. We'll burn them all to fuck!"

Well, thanks. That's an even better prospect. I won't even have time to bleed out before I start choking on the smoke.

Once again I'm in the shit. How much more of this can I take?

I run downstairs, open the door a little, and take aim at the staircase going up. Well, then, where are these half-arsed arsonists, anyway? Here they are, several of them at once coming round the bend in the staircase.

Avatars!

So my finger squeezes the trigger.

I really have got the hang of the pump action now. Suddenly I remember, the bit of wood you pull is called the forestock. I've learned to pull it back and forward with the same hectic speed as the head of an ink-jet printer crossing the page. And just as soon as it comes back, my finger's already squeezing the trigger. I fire off five rounds at machine-gun speed.

The landing fills with smoke and screams. Someone bellows and runs upstairs. I didn't miss – there's a pile of bodies on the stairs. How many?

Two or three at least. I close the door, and this time make sure to lock it. If they saw where the shots were coming from, they'll be very eager to knock it down. Let them try. This is one of the steel ones, so a speedy result is far from guaranteed.

Back I go up the stairs, reloading my shotgun on the way. I don't have that much ammo left, so I need to start saving. I pull the magazine out of the pistol and find six rounds. Plus, one more in the barrel, I think, makes seven. True, I'm no great shot, but close up I should be able to manage.

Again I look at the monitor. On the landing, chaos rules. Two of the bad guys have their guns trained on the staircase, while another is bandaging his injured comrade. Is that all of them? There's no one else around.

I'd hate to be in their shoes. When you come to think of it, they're trapped. In theory, they could rush down from the second floor. But how do they know no one's lying in wait for them outside? They've already been caught out once on the way down, why not again? It looks like they take the prospect of dying in the smoke seriously, and they really don't want to end up like that.

I have a thought. I could shout from downstairs and offer them to put down their guns and leave. Tell them "we" won't shoot. After all, they really don't know how many of "us" there are hiding on the staircase. Could it work? Would I go for it in their situation? Like fuck.

The way the bandits see it, the enemy downstairs is clearly in no hurry, and in no danger. He can go on waiting. The injured guys upstairs could snuff it soon, and it's unlikely anyone's got food and water with them – another important factor to take into account. They can't be expecting much in the way of help to arrive, either. Chances are, nobody else is coming – they're all here already. So there's no reason for the enemy to take risks and no reason for them to make a deal with anyone.

In short, those guys aren't going to believe me.

Still...

“Hey, losers!” I shout through the half-opened door on the first floor. “You still alive up there?”

“Go fuck yourself!” they shout in response. “Our guys are approaching from both sides. Any second now you’re fucked!”

Yeah, right. Who’s going to give their enemy all that useful information? Even in Bollywood films they don’t do anything quite that stupid.

So, that means no one else is coming. There’s nothing to worry about.

“Well, fuck the lot of you, then. That just means a few more of you will end up dead here,” I answer phlegmatically, shrugging my shoulders. They can’t see my gesture, of course, but they can hear it in my voice. Look at them, sitting there all cynical and remorseless. I’ll bet they drink hot blood for breakfast instead of tea.

The funny thing is, I’m not exaggerating one bit. Whether it’s them or me, we’re all in the same shit. Obviously, I could just leave everything and walk calmly out of here, but there’s always the possibility that one of the guys upstairs will see me and take a shot.

Plus, I’ve got too much to lose. My business with the shopkeeper, my first-aid kit with all that’s in it, and the booty I could salvage. “To the victor go the spoils!” That’s a phrase I’ve come across time and again in action movies. Moreover, from what I remember from computer games and those lurid-looking books, loot is all that guarantees your future survival. After all, there aren’t that many shops in this city (in fact, I only know of one), and I still need to drink and eat. Sure, I’m alright for clothes for now, but as for guns and ammo, I still need to find them somewhere.

The bad guys upstairs must also realize that no one’s coming to save them. The enemy downstairs can just slowly bring some petrol from the garage, pour it all over the staircase, and calmly wait outside.

“What do you want, arsehole?” they ask from above.

“Not just me, all of us. I’m not working solo here, I’ve got the firm with me, capeesh? I just happen to have the gift of the gab, so that’s why I’m here chewing shit with you.”

God knows if what I’m saying sounds anything like the language they use among themselves. From what I’ve read, it’s something similar. Unfortunately, I don’t know all the cons’ slang, and the words that do come to mind don’t really seem to fit the present context. All I need to do is say one thing out of place...

So far, however, nothing I’ve said has caused any particular fuss.

“Well, what does your guv’nor want, then?”

Of course, that’s what they call their leaders!

“Right now, he wants you all to clear the fuck out of here. Put your guns and the loot down, and we won’t cap you.”

“You’re shitting me. We put down our pieces, and you’ll just pop us in the back?”

“We’ve got a can of gas down here – we can just start pouring. Half of it should be enough for you lot. We won’t be risking nothing, mind. This building ain’t worth shit to us, and you can burn with your pieces in your arms. They won’t be much fucking use to you then, will they?”

There’s silence from upstairs, then the same voice again:

“What else?”

“Don’t show up round the shop again, or we’ll put you straight down. If you’ve got any brains you’ll realize we sent that fish to you on purpose, and he brought you here to us. If we don’t have a deal, you’ll be staying here for good.”

“I can’t make that decision for the guv’nor.”

“Then you take his place. What’s the problem?”

I don’t really know whether that’s actually a possibility, but it seems like the guy’s giving it some serious thought.

“Yeah, right. Fucking replace him...”

“You bring him round here tomorrow, and we’ll do the rest. Think of it as a gesture of good faith on our part.”

Again, I’ve no idea how acceptable or ethical the suggestion might seem to a bandit. But clearly, it’s something worth considering.

“He won’t fall for that.”

“Tell him your guns are still here. We’re not going to let you go with them now, but tomorrow’s a difference story! Anyway, fuck this for a game of soldiers,” I suddenly change my tone of voice, “it’s up to you. You can start saying your final prayers now, for all I care. It’ll only take a minute for us to get the gas.”

My sudden change of attitude had a fearful effect on the unseen bandit. He gave a cry of alarm.

“Just wait a second!” he shouted. “Hold your horses, alright?”

Like I’m really in a hurry! All I want is to get out of here in one piece. I creep carefully back to the monitor. From the look of it, the mood’s changed dramatically upstairs. Nobody looks like they’re up for fighting anymore. The bandits have gathered in a circle and are having a heated debate.

Bam! A shot echoes down the staircase, and one of the debaters suddenly has nothing else to say. That’s quite the argument they were having there.

“Hey!”

I almost go arse over tip dashing back down the stairs.

“Well?”

“We’re coming out.”

“Leave your pieces upstairs, and anything else you’ve picked up here, too. Come down one at a time. Once you’re out on the street, no hanging around, just get the fuck out of here. This isn’t a good area. Even we’re afraid sometimes.”

“What?” says the bandit with surprise.

“Not what, who! There’s a guy round here they call the Predator.”

I hear noises from above, and run back to the monitor. Ah, now they’re going through the pockets of their dead comrades. Who gives a shit, as long as they leave their guns behind? At last the first one comes to the stairs.

“I’m coming down. Don’t shoot!”

After standing still for a few seconds, he holds out his arms to show he’s not carrying a weapon, and begins to walk downstairs.

I run back down and keep the barrel of the shotgun on him as he passes. He sees the half-open door and the barrel sticking out, and he presses himself to the wall. Be afraid! Further concern should be created by the plastic oil can that’s standing open in the middle of the landing. I’m pretty sure he’ll remember that it wasn’t there before. That’s because I took it from the kitchen of the two-floor flat and put it there while we were having our little chat. And even if it’s actually full of olive oil rather than petrol, there’s no way he’ll know that – I was careful to rip off the label.

He’s gone. The downstairs door slams shut behind him.

“Next!”

Christ, I could be in training for Everest with all this up and down stairs.

I see the second guy turn the corner, and again the door slams.

“Listen, there’s two of us coming next. My mate took one in the stomach, and he can barely crawl.”

“Don’t give a fuck, just get on with it.”

It’s hard to tell just how badly the guy was hit, but the pair of them can barely hobble down the stairs.

I hear the door close again. So what? Does that mean they’ve all gone? It’s not like I can see the ground-floor hallway.

Just yesterday, I’d have gone running outside with a victory cry without thinking twice about it. Well, maybe I wouldn’t actually have shouted, but I’d certainly have cleared out of here as fast as possible. But that was yesterday, when I was still a completely different person. The peace-loving sysadmin Denis, nickname Foretop. But who is this guy sitting in an empty flat with a couple of rotting corpses and a shotgun clutched in his bloody hands? I don’t know this guy. I’m pretty sure that none of my friends have ever met him, either. There’s nothing tough or heroic about my appearance – no pumped muscles, no deadpan expression, no square jaw, and certainly no fists of steel. Nothing to strike fear into the heart of anyone I meet. So that’s why I’m not running off anywhere. Still in my socks, I quietly search the dead bodies on the first-floor landing. There are three of them lying about. In terms of weapons, I find an ancient revolver – the sort you see in movies about the Revolution – a sawn-off double-barrel shotgun, and a baseball bat. Plus a few rounds, a couple of rings, and a little bit of food. And knives, of course, all sorts of different knives. I return to the flat, lay my loot on the floor, and lock the door.

I’m going to be very careful going out onto the second floor. For all I know, one of the bandits decided to test their stamina and pretend to be a corpse. Who the fuck knows? It would have made good sense to start my search from the top, but where am I going to get some good sense from, anyway?

I carefully turn the handle of the lock and, clutching a gun in each hand, spring out onto the landing. I probably look a little strange – with a modern pistol in one hand and an ancient revolver in the other. It must be

three times my age at least, if not four. You might even want to laugh indulgently at my appearance. Alright, I'm not some special forces tough guy. I'm not any kind of soldier at all. Even if I did do my military service, all I did was spend a year sitting at a computer in headquarters, and fire an assault rifle at the range a few times. That's the full extent of my military achievements. Sure, I can march in file, but who cares about that now? Anyway, we'll see who's laughing in a minute! But there's no one here to laugh. You can't do that good an impression of a corpse without a whopping great hole in your side, and it's obvious from here that the second guy bled out long ago. Good Lord, there it is! My beloved first-aid kit.

* * *

So, here's my home. Where the heart is, and all that. It makes quite an impression. The door hasn't come off its hinges (it is steel, after all), but it has been badly warped and is hanging to the side. My poor flat! The amount of effort I put into it, not to mention money. Now that's all gone to shit. As well as mutilating the door, the explosion mangled most of my furniture, and tossed my few belongings across the whole room. Actually, that might have been done earlier when they were searching the place.

In the far corner of the room there's a motionless body. The fact it's a corpse isn't hard to tell even from a distance – half his head's been blown to fuck. There's a shotgun lying next to him. Not like mine, much bigger. At first glance, I see that the tube under the barrel is much longer. That's where the shells go, so it must take a bigger load. There's some kind of mesh over the barrel, and in place of the stock there's some sort of bent metal shit that can probably be folded up, too. It's also got a pistol grip. Basically, it's a much more serious weapon than my not-quite-sawn-off. Not that it helped its owner much...

The shells are the same, so I put my own gun down on the couch with no regrets. Now I've got a much more imposing piece.

I ended up having to sleep back in the other flat, the one that was ripe with the smell of death. It was the only place I could shut my eyes and not

worry about being woken by a knife tenderly drawn across my throat.

I'd like those bandits to breath that fragrance for the rest of their lives! Tearing open a pack of sanitary towels, I improvised a mask and soaked it in deodorant. It really wasn't much of an improvement. True, I did open the balcony door and use the cover of darkness to throw out the former owner's body. It's only the first floor, so he won't smash to pieces. Sorry, old boy, but I won't be organizing any funeral rites for you, else I might end up lying right next to you. The man was followed soon after by his wife. Hell, I'm not going to describe in detail how that all worked out. Suffice to say that I nearly puked three times.

All the spoils I'd gathered I dragged out onto the same balcony in the hope they wouldn't be infused with the stench of corpse. Genius! I should have slept there myself. After all, there was a sleeping bag in my flat. What did I say before about good ideas and when they come? Idiot! Still, too late now to worry.

Sitting in the fresh air next morning, I was at last able to take stock of all my loot. Three shotguns, two pistols, and the old revolver. Plus a certain amount of ammo for all of them. One of shotguns is a different calibre – sixteen-gauge – so I probably won't keep it. Of the pistols, I'll probably keep the newer one, which was made only a couple of years ago. The magazine's not full, but that doesn't matter. It's not really my weapon anyway. The shotgun I picked up in my old flat, however – that's a serious piece of kit! Just the look of it makes it worth holding on to. Turns out you rechamber it in a completely different way. You don't need to pull on the forestock, which doesn't even move, in fact. There's a lever on the side like on an assault rifle, and that's what you need to pull. Whether or not that's convenient, we'll have to wait and see. But the magazine certainly takes far more ammo – ten rounds at once. Considering my shooting "skills", that's a serious argument in its favour. On the other hand, the strap on it is complete shit. I'll have to take the one off my not-quite-sawn-off, which is much better. I also had several knives and three baseball bats. The latter looked particularly useless next to a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Distracted by this inventory of my stores, I didn't quite catch what was going on. That was a mistake. I heard the clatter of boots downstairs,

and the staircase suddenly filled with noise and commotion.

“Check the corner!”

“Hold there!”

“Second floor!”

What the fuck?

I hear the hammering of gun butts on doors, the splintering of wood, and cries of rage that test the limits of the human vocal cords.

“Find them! The footprints are fresh, so they can’t have gone far.”

Well, I’m in the shit. Looks like the bandits’ guv’nor took my declarations of yesterday seriously.

So... they saw the door my gun barrel was protruding from. Steel it may be, but there’s no such thing as an insurmountable barrier. Shot probably won’t get through it, but pistol bullets might. But they won’t bother to break down the door, will they? There’s the garage downstairs, and who was it mentioned petrol? I can’t jump from the balcony, either. There’s a guy running along the front of the building with a pistol. He’ll see me, he’ll shout, and that’s it for me. The rest will come running in an instant.

I lay my guns on the ground and check the ammo. Looks like this is it. The course of my life ends here. Shit, it’s just not fair! I glance at the street. It’s right there, but I still can’t run!

Something flashes in the corner of my eye. I turn my head in that direction. Creeping along the wall of the building, sweeping the area with their gun barrels, is a file of men in camouflage. Wearing heavy helmets, and with their gun barrels glinting dully, these guys are no bandits. They look a lot like those Bears form the first shop, except their camouflage is completely different. More like the uniforms the guards at our company wore.

“Kiryukha, watch out! Grunts!”

The cries on the staircase die out. The troops outside are going to walk past, and the bandits will go on breaking down doors. Their cries may have stopped, but nobody’s stopped bashing the doors. The results come soon enough. Something in the hallway gives an ugly rasp, and the swinging door slams against the wall.

“Shit! What a stink! You wouldn’t want to hang around in here!”

“Then don’t hang around! Turn the place upside down fast and move on!”

So, this is the end of the party. I look around the wall and aim my gun at the door from the hallway. I don’t have to wait long before it’s slammed open. Bam! Interestingly, I don’t have to cycle the rounds. That little lever I thought you needed to pull shoots backwards and the spent shell flies out of the opening. So, it’s like an automatic shotgun, is it? Cycles by itself? I pull the trigger again, and a new load of shot flies towards the doorway. I hear screams, so I must have hit someone. An answering shot sends down a hail of broken glass. They hit the window, sending the pane flying in all directions, and part of it spraying all over me.

What if... Without waiting to complete the thought, I swing the barrel of the gun round towards the window and fire twice in the direction of the advancing column of soldiers. With my left hand, I pull out the pistol and fire off the full load in the same direction. Obviously, with my skills, my chance of hitting anything is close to zero, but there’s a chance I could provoke return fire at the building. Yup, I barely had time to get my head back inside. The remaining glass in the window flies out with a crash and a bang. Automatic fire comes from several guns at once on the street. F-f-f-fuck, what if they get through the wall?

Understandably, the bullets fired from that angle mostly fly into the upper parts of the wall. Only a few are clever enough to reach the hall doorway. I doubt very much that will please the guys coming into the flat from the staircase. I stick my barrel out round the corner and fire twice,

trying to make sure the shot skims the floor. If anyone's lying down there for cover, I don't envy them.

I got a hit or one of the shooters outside got lucky. Either way, there was another scream from that direction. Then the shootout became hard to follow. It appeared they'd forgotten about me for a while, so I took the opportunity to grab my little backpack and part of my spoils and dash up the inside staircase to the second floor. I drag the couch over to close off the staircase and rapidly shove shells into the magazine. Right, now I have ten shots, eleven even, at the ready. Regretfully, I chuck my new pistol under the couch – it's out of ammo. The old revolver, on the other hand, I shove into my belt – the cylinder's full. And just in case, I lay my trusty not-quite-sawn-off nearby. It's my last-chance weapon, and this will be the site of my last stand.

The gunfighters don't have time for me right now. Shots thunder all around, and there's even an explosion of some sort, shaking the walls and sending something crashing down below. That can't have been a shot, unless the attackers have managed to get a canon up here.

"I'm covering!"

"Hold the landing and clear a path forward!"

What's most interesting about what I can hear isn't the meaning of the words – which, although more or less understandable, doesn't tell me anything particularly useful – it's the fact that they're being shouted in English. That I don't understand. I mean, of course I know that all our company's premises were guarded by foreign specialists. Even the Spa had USEC security. But as far as I know, most of those sites were outside the city. Anyway, what does it matter now? So some guys are shouting in English on the staircase. Makes no difference to me. They could be speaking mumbo-jumbo for all I care. It doesn't mean they're going to think any longer before pulling the trigger, now does it?

The sounds of battle gradually shift upwards – whoever they are, the attackers are demonstrating their incontrovertible superiority over the bandits. Now the shots are ringing out behind the second-floor door.

Kaboom! A cloud of dust, smoke, and other crap hangs in the air. It suddenly becomes harder to breathe, and visibility drops.

“Checking!” shouts somebody downstairs.

Is that what you fucking call throwing a grenade through an open doorway, eh?

Through the sounds of battle and the ringing in my ears, I hear footsteps – someone coming up the inside staircase. I doubt very much it’s one of the bandits. As far as I can tell, they’ve all been pushed back upstairs, or at least the fight is now on the third floor. Still, that doesn’t make it any better for me – this “unknown soldier” can shoot me just as well, and his bullets won’t deal any less death than a bandit’s shells. I jump up and run across the top of the staircase so that anyone coming up will have their back towards me.

The former owners had put some sort of weird modern sculpture there. For reasons of beauty, I guess. Although just what it was supposed to represent I haven’t a clue. Some sort of race, maybe. Or are those tentacles growing out of a lawn? At any rate, it provides me with some cover. It’s hard to see my head through the wild criss-cross of sticks. True, they’re not going to stop any bullets, alas.

A step, then another, and a head in a helmet comes into view. It’s not a bandit – he’s in uniform. In his hand is a pistol with an unusually long and fat barrel. He moves up a little further, stops, and listens.

Good luck with that. In this maelstrom of shouts and firing, the devil himself couldn’t make out what’s going on. In fact, that’s who our visitor reminds me of. He’s clearly got his own way of sorting out the confusion, and I think in some cases the devil might even envy him his ruthlessness. In any case, our visitor is clearly not encumbered by any constraints, moral or otherwise. He couldn’t care less about the fate of anyone who might happen to be on the upper floor of the flat. Holding his pistol with the elbow of his left arm, he pulls out a black cylinder. Even I, a man with little knowledge of military matters, need no explanation as to what it is. I heard one just like it went off downstairs a minute ago.

It’s a grenade, and the soldier is about to throw it, and then I’m fucked. Without thinking, I raise the shotgun and squeeze the trigger. If I hit our visitor, then it’s only lightly. Most of the round ricochets off the steps and the bars of the staircase and whistles all around. I probably only manage to get a few pellets of shot on target, but those few pellets hit his hand.

He can’t hold on to the grenade.

This time, I feel a lot more of the effect. Fortunately, most of the grenade fragments lodge in the downstairs ceiling, but the blast wave or whatever it is hits me with full force. I lie on the floor and stare blankly at the ceiling, while my ears just go on ringing.

I hope it hit the unknown soldier a whole lot harder. True, if I lie around like this much longer, then they’ll take the cup from me too, soon enough. I doubt very much that that guy trundled along to clean out this flat on his own initiative. Sooner or later, somebody’s going to notice he’s missing, and then the dead man’s comrades are going to flood in here. When they see their friend lifeless or badly injured, they’ll want to take revenge on whoever did the dirty deed, and that’s why I need to get out of here as fast as possible.

Where to run to, though? It’s a good question. I doubt very much that when they came into the building the soldiers left the entrance unguarded, and judging by the professionalism of their training, you can be quite sure that there won’t be a guy hovering about right there in the doorway. They’ll be lying out of sight somewhere on the street, with the entrance fixed in their sights. So, not time for walkies.

Running upstairs into the ongoing gunfight is an even more stupid idea. No, I’ve no desire to give anyone that sort of surprise. I get up and pick my shotgun up of the floor. Then, on shaking legs, I walk down the stairs. There’s the entrance door to the flat. I peek out carefully at the landing. Apart from the bodies of bandits, which are lying both in and outside the flat, I don’t see anyone else. Of course, that doesn’t at all mean that there’s no one else around. Just one floor above there’s still a fierce gunfight going on. I can’t rule out the possibility, either, that the desperate

bandits might make a break for the exit. They've got fuck all to lose, and at least that way they'd have a chance.

Holding my shotgun at the ready, I go carefully down the stairs, stepping over the dead bodies, until I'm on the ground-floor landing. I'm not planning to go for the front entrance, however. I turn again, take the steps down, and right in front of me is the door to the garage, still shut tight. I had good grounds to hop that none of the bandits would have tried to get through this way. For the simple reason that not one of them could possibly have had a key. Whereas I do, and it's already proved its usefulness once.

The steel door clicks quietly shut behind me. You might think that there's nowhere to hide, what with there being almost no cars here. However, in the far corner of this vast space there's a kind of workshop. They installed a ramp here, which is currently empty, and there's also a service pit – the hole in the ground that you park a car over when you want to look underneath it. I jump straight in there, and settle down on an empty can of motor oil.

Now we sit and wait. If the soldiers feel the evil urge to, they'll blow down the door to the garage. After that, they'll quickly search all the cars standing in the garage. That's to be expected, and they won't find shit. However, there's no reason to think they'll necessarily work out that there's a pit in the garage, let alone find it here in the dark. Most garages have just the one servicing solution – either a pit or a ramp. As a rule, they're not kitted out like ours. There's a chance that, after shining a torch around and seeing the ramp in the far corner, they won't even bother to come over here and investigate further.

I sit and wait. Through the steel door I still hear the sounds of the battle above. Gradually, however, they drop away, and I strain my ears to hear what happens next. Any second now I'll hear heavy army boots on the steps down to the garage. Then all I can do is sit on my awkward perch and pray to the god of laziness that he shower down his blessings upon them.

Twenty minutes pass and nothing happens. Nobody hammers on the door with their stocks or tries to throw a grenade under it. Nor can I hear any more shooting. So, the battle's over. The victors, having searched the

bodies of their slain enemies and grabbed what they want, will have packed up and gone home. Well, if that's how things stand then there's no reason for me to hang around here anymore. I climb up out of the pit, but I don't go back the way I came. Instead, I head towards the street. Having seen those soldiers, it seems quite possible they could have put some nasty little explosive device under the garage door.

Once again, the key comes in useful. The door to the street swings open, and I crouch down and listen to what's going on outside. I hear no shots, or shouts, or running footsteps. It seems fair to assume that whoever could still run is now far away from here, and those who couldn't aren't going to be hurrying anywhere anymore. I now have a little time to take a look over the site of the recent battle, and pick up the stuff I've already stashed away.

I didn't find much, sadly. Most of the good loot and weapons had already been carried off by the soldiers. Turns out that the idea in the books and computer games that you can live off just the spoils of your battles isn't entirely true to life. Either that or you need a mighty gang to make sure you're nearly always victorious and, once you've stripped the enemy down to their pants, you have enough hands to carry the loot.

The bandits' weapons that I'd stashed on the balcony were all still there – probably because no one had bothered to look out there. Also untouched were my not-quite-sawn-off, which I had unconsciously placed next to the weird sculpture, the pistol I'd shoved under the couch, and a few other bits and pieces that clearly hadn't been of sufficient interest to the victors.

Having lugged all that loot into the garage, I began a more methodical search of the building, taking advantage of the fact that the front doors to nearly all of the flats had been broken down by the angry bandits. Unsurprisingly, I didn't find much of any great value, but I did manage to gather a couple of bags of food supplies, which I took down and piled up with the looted weapons.

Returning once again to the two-floor flat, I began a methodical search of the whole place, beginning on the upper floor. The draft through

the smashed windows and the broken door managed to great rid of most of the foul smells, so there was no need to dick around trying to make a mask anymore. Without putting much thought into it, I simply pulled the contents of each cupboard or draw out onto the floor, and having gone through each pile of junk, moved on to the next cupboard. It's worth noting that whoever finished off the owner for some reason didn't bother to do a similar search. Either because they were interrupted, or because they immediately found what they were looking for. The truth of my second guess was confirmed when I was searching through their walk-in wardrobe. Behind a row of hanging dresses I discovered a wall safe with the door wide open and nothing inside. You'd imagine that was the main aim of their visit.

There's nothing to find here, so I turn around to leave when suddenly something tiny catches my eye for second. I stop and look around me slowly and carefully. Caught on some sort of bauble on one of the dresses is a chain, and on the end of the chain hangs a glittering metal token. Well, well, well! See, that's not just a token. The trained eye will tell you that that is a flash drive. I've seen a few like it. As a rule, they were used by all the shining stars among the management of our sainted organization. If my guess is right, then there'll be an inscription engraved on one side of the token. It'll be the name of one particular division of the conglomerate or an affiliated company. I bend down and, catching the chain between my fingers, bring the token to my face. TGG, it says.

And that's all there is. I don't remember ever having seen those initials before. Clearly, said organization bears some relation to Terra Group Labs, but what exactly? I've had all sorts of data storage pass through my hands, and seen plenty more belonging to other people. However, I've never come across this inscription before. And here I should explain a little – flash drives like this weren't handed out to just anyone. They're not normal storage units. In certain situations, this thing can also be used as a sort of key. There are some doors you can open with it, and it can also be used as a pass key to get through some security barriers. As a rule, these flash drives are either protected with sophisticated passwords, or they have a built-in fingerprint reader. Turning the flash drive in my hand, I shake my head. There's no fingerprint reader here. Nowhere on the patterned surface of the token is there a screen that might work as a scanner. It's just an

ordinary flash drive. But also a key, maybe. That's all I know. Where and how to use the little fucker I have difficulty imagining. Still, I'm not going to throw it away. It doesn't weigh much and it doesn't need feeding. I shove my new treasure into my pocket.

My further searching left me the happy owner of some tough, almost military boots that were more or less my size. That completes my search of the top floor, so I head downstairs. I move slowly, looking around and trying to work out where else I can search for anything useful. I take a step, then another. Hullo there! There's a fat metal tube sticking out of one of the flower pots. Turns out it's the very same pistol that dude with the grenade was waving around before he met his unfortunate end. Fuck me, it flew a fair distance! From the look of it, I believe this is what you call a pistol silencer, or something of the sort. Whatever the name, it's designed to keep your shooting relatively quiet.

Yes, it's a pistol, but it's not Russian-made. It's got some weird, unfamiliar, hi-tech design. And there's an inscription: SIG. Even what little I know is enough to tell me that means it's a Sig Sauer. I've read something about them. Made in Switzerland, aren't they? How the hell did it end up here? Admittedly, if you've got the money these days you can buy any gun you want. But still, the silencer... They must be some very special type of security service, the company that the dude with the grenade belonged to. Examining the pistol, I find a button that releases the magazine. It's full. I can see the bullets shining with oil through a hole in the lower part of the magazine. It's a powerful-looking weapon, but sadly in my hands it's nigh on useless. Nonetheless, just the sight of it should make quite an impression. It's not too heavy, and it looks truly terrifying. I slide the magazine back in place and shove the pistol in my belt. When I have the time, I'll make it a little case. In fact, that raises an interesting question, as just about every pocket I have is now stuffed full with ammo for my different guns.

In the hallway on the first floor, I examine the bodies of the bandits. Some of them obviously died at my hand. The squeamishness I felt before about looking at dead bodies is all gone now. Just take a look at this lot! I crouch down to search one of the dead. There's nothing of interest in his

pockets, but over his jacket he's wearing a canvas waistcoat with a huge number of pockets. It's the sort electrical fitters and other technicians wear. You can keep a huge amount of useful kit in all those pockets, and there are also various loops you can hold or hang tools with. I don't think the dead guy was any kind of technician, however, and it's not tools his pockets are stuffed with. Instead, he has a few bullets, a couple of packs of biscuits, and a fair number of cigarettes. I don't smoke, so they're no great prize for me, although I do realize that as merchandise they have considerable value in our current situation. Put bluntly, you can't grow tobacco in these climes, and I doubt very much anyone's bothering to send shipments of cigarettes into town right now. And I've seen what smokers are like when you take their evil weed from them. I've heard that some will even try smoking dried leaves. There's definitely a market for the cigarettes.

I swing the waistcoat in my hands, then pull it on decisively. Fortunately, the former owner got a very clean shot to the head, so there's hardly any blood on the waistcoat. Besides, it's not like a few stains make it any less comfortable. Now I have considerably more opportunity to carry away my prizes. My beloved backpack with medicine can easily hold another two or three kilos of useful stuff, and the bullets and other bits and pieces can go in my new waistcoat. Sadly, there's nowhere to put the pistol for now, so I'll have to carry it in my belt.

It took me till evening to carry everything I'd found in the abandoned building back to my basement. I even took some mugs, plates, and spoons – they always come in handy, after all. It seemed like too much effort to lug back all the different half-empty bottles of spirits I found, so I decided to let my high standards of taste slide and poured all the vodka I found into two big bottles. Really, what's the big difference? It's all 40% ethanol. I did the same with the brandy. After all, all those drinks now have a primarily medicinal value, so the subtle variations of taste and aroma are largely insignificant.

I spent a long time wandering about my lair, sorting and inventorying all my stores and spoils. Then I fell asleep almost immediately, without dwelling at all on all that had happened.

Morning. Can't say that it's a particularly good one, as I'm more of a night owl. But it's not the worst, either. I'm not hungry, I'm not sleeping on the street, and there's no one standing behind me with a whip, either. No need to bust my balls rushing of anywhere.

There were some thoughts that came to me yesterday. Thoughts that span around in my head this way and that.

What I know is that I'm no kind of headhunter or retired – let alone active – special forces hero. Nobody's ever going to accept my undisputed authority. So what do I really know how to do? By which I don't mean lighting fires and opening tins. There's plenty of equally skilled specialists in that field round about.

I'm a sysadmin, but let's forget about that. It's not just that there's no computer network here, there isn't even any electricity. All the computers in the basement have been standing dead for weeks.

A logistics expert. Well then, what are we shipping? Where to and with what transport? Ten bottles of water, on my own back, to the street next door. It's not the greatest logistical challenge.

What exactly can someone with my skill-set do in the present situation? Yeah, don't tell me, I can carry the famous beam – fuck that for a game of soldiers!

Chapter 5

The street greeted me with piercing wind and fine rain, nasty weather that sent my thoughts immediately to the warmth and comforts of home. Yeah, and to a warm bed with a hot girl in it, but when was I likely to experience those pleasures again, eh?

I'm still not even sure what's really going on round here. According to the snatches of conversation I heard from our "security detail" (Makar's henchmen), all sorts of bad stuff was going on in the city and surrounding area, and there was no point in hoping for urgent help from state agencies. They clearly don't have time for us right now. Plus, the behaviour of the soldiers I have seen doesn't inspire any great confidence, to be honest. From what I remember from the TV news, they're supposed to protect and save us, but I can't say I've noticed them trying. Shooting on sight seems to be more their line, which also provides some food for thought.

Anyway, here's the building I'm looking for. I just sit in the bushes for a while, examining the construction and its surroundings. I don't see anything unusual. If that wanker of a lookout can be believed, this is where their gang has its base of operations. However, I can't find a single sentry. Even Makar had people on guard, but here there's nobody around.

True, the gang has suffered some mind-blowing losses if the wanker is to be believed. According to him, their total number was only a little over a dozen, which seems suspicious, as there were at least that many in the building yesterday.

Either way, the bandits haven't put anyone on guard. Although perhaps I'm giving them too much credit by calling them bandits, when they're really just ordinary street trash. Even Makar's henchmen massively outclass them in terms of organization. And thank God for that, as far as

I'm concerned. With ordinary street trash I have at least some chance of coming out on top. Having taken one more look around, I emerge from my hiding place and quickly run over to the wall of the building. It's still quiet here – I can hear neither conversations nor footsteps. I do catch the smell of smoke, however, which means there's a bonfire burning somewhere nearby. Moving over to the nearest entryway, I take a glance inside, holding my shotgun at the ready. It's empty.

On the first floor landing, I can already see the building's inner courtyard. There is indeed a bonfire burning close to the building, with a container of some kind hanging over it on a metal tube, which leads to the assumption that some sort of cooking is going on. That is indeed the case, as there's a figure of some sort hovering over the container and occasionally stirring the contents with a ladle. So that's why there weren't any sentries – everyone's hungry.

Located opposite me is a two-storey building that appears to serve as the residence of all these "men at arms". The little garden where the bonfire is now burning is being used by them as a kind of outdoor canteen. Basically, it makes sense. Nobody wants to start a bonfire indoors, the electricity's off, and there's no gas in the pipes. An outdoor kitchen is a logical solution.

I try to count the men assembled. There's six of them, including one vaguely familiar face. To judge by his bandaged arm, it's the same guy who unhesitatingly slit the throat of his wounded comrade in front of me. Presumably he didn't come to the showdown with me yesterday because of his injury. That's how he's still alive.

What I'm wondering is where the boss is. If he got killed during the attack on my building, they should be experiencing something of a power vacuum, but how can I tell? When they come to sharing out the food, it should be obvious. The boss will surely get the biggest share and the best piece of meat.

I didn't have to wait for long before the cook took yet another taste of his stew, nodded approvingly and, turning to the waiting men, shouted:

“Bring your bowls over!”

This gets an immediate reaction from the men sitting and lying around the yard. They jump up and start moving towards the fire.

There it is! On receiving his bowl of stew, one of them doesn’t tuck into it, but instead turns around and heads towards the small building. It would seem the boss doesn’t take his meals with everyone else, but gets his own special serving.

I leave my observation post and go back outside. My destination is now clear, so I make a small loop to avoid the diners in the courtyard. Creeping along the wall of the building, I hear a quiet conversation. I stop and glance around. Aha, there’s a window ajar, and the voices are emanating from behind it.

“Alright, don’t sweat it! We’ll just rest up a while, find ourselves a few more lads, and then we head back out into the neighbourhood.”

“The way you tell it, everything’s just hunky-dory. What are we going to say to Syomka now? His boys trusted us, followed us, and where are they now? He’s staying quiet for now, but we’ll have to answer to him sooner or later. Are you planning on paying him a visit?”

“Well...”

“See! You need to think more. Get the boys to go back to the shopkeeper’s and shake someone down.”

“Fucking brilliant! What happened last time we shook someone down?”

In reply there’s only coughing. Apparently, the other guy has nothing better to offer.

Glancing round, I find some sort of box nearby, and carefully drag it over to the wall, trying not to make any noise. Balancing my hand on the window ledge, I climb onto the box and cautiously peak through the

window. One of the men I can see straight away. He's standing by the doorway holding an empty tray. You'd assume that's the guy who brought the meal in. So where's the boss, then? He's not in my field of vision. I'd have to guess that he's lying under the window, and from my position he's out of sight due to the windowsill. What if I can climb a little higher? The voice in my head asks snarkily what the fuck I'm trying to prove with all these acrobatics. So, I get up a little higher and see him – then what? In all honesty, I don't have an answer to that question. Obviously, when I was on my way over to the bandits' hideout I had a basic action plan of sorts. Right now, however, all those theoretical proposals have gone clean out of my head. Once again, I think how easy it was for all those action heroes. They were never beset with doubt, and they were never bothered by any qualms, moral or otherwise. Even common colds avoided them somehow. If one of those homegrown terminators was in my place now, they'd have long ago gunned down all the diners, then busted into the building and hanged the boss with his own guts. I, however, have no idea what's going to happen. My imagination just refuses to take me any further than the first shot. Maybe I have already shot people, and killed them even, but that was all in situations where there really was no other choice. Now I have to aim in cold blood at a man eating his lunch, then pull the trigger. Sure, deep down inside I realize that if that man was in my situation he probably wouldn't stop for a minute before shooting me. But that's him, and I'm a completely different person. I'm not a killer, or a thief, or a bandit. When it comes to pulling the trigger without any emotion whatsoever, I just don't think I can do it.

I climb quietly down from the box and move along the wall. Where am I going and why? I've no idea. After taking a few steps, I stop under an open window. Lying on the ground right in front of me is a bureau that's been thrown out of the window. Or some piece of furniture anyway. Maybe bureau isn't the right word for it, and I've no idea why that word came to mind.

A few seconds later, I find to my surprise that I'm sitting on the windowsill. In other words, I'm already inside the room. Hang about! How on earth did that happen. Once I've come to terms with where I am, I slip carefully down to the floor. In the room, everything's been turned upside

down. It looks as if some crazy fight took place here, during which both sides made free use of the furniture. The open door is blocked by a wardrobe that's been turned over, which makes it almost impossible to get out into the corridor. The only way is to crawl under it. But if I try, I won't be able to do it with my shotgun in my hands. I need to keep it on my back. However, moving round here without a drawn gun would the height of stupidity. I pull out my looted Sig Sauer and, holding it in my right hand, I try to squeeze under the wardrobe. I don't manage it the first time. I have to shuffle backwards and fold up the stock of my shotgun. Only after doing that can I manage to fit through the gap.

Getting back up on my feet, I move carefully along the wall. The floor here in the corridor is covered with linoleum, so I don't have to worry about creaking boards. Which is good, because I still have no idea how to act in this situation.

Suddenly the voices become much louder and I smell cigarette smoke coming from under the door. So the boss is right here, in this room.

Without fully understanding what I'm doing, I cautiously pull on the door handle. Through the crack this produces, I can now see the part of the room that was hidden from me before. The boss really is reclining on a narrow couch beneath the window. He's injured, his left shoulder wrapped in a bloody bandage. He's a big strong man with thick black stubble growing up to his eyes. A powerful guy. Were you to meet him on the street on a dark night, you'd be handing him your wallet and anything else you had before he even asked.

"Well, then?" whines the voice in my head. "Now you've seen the boss. Did you get a good look at him? Are you happy now? Shall we get the hell out of here?"

We probably should.

But at that exact moment the man lying on the couch turns his head towards me. His eyes widen, and his right hand immediately fumbles under a cushion. He almost certainly has a pistol under there, or something similar. He's going to pull it out right now, and then I won't be able to run

anywhere anymore. One shot, and the whole crowd outside round the fire will be piling in here. Desperately, I jerk up my pistol, and with a shaking finger I pull the trigger.

I guess I was expecting my gun to fire completely noiselessly. However, instead of spitting out the bullet in total silence, it makes a strange cracking sound. The bolt shoots back loudly, and the empty case flies back into my face. Not into my eyes, thank heaven. Believe it or not, the bullet ends up quite close to the boss. He jerks back and tries to stand up, but I fire a few times more. From this distance it really would be hard to miss. The bandit's body slowly slides down the wall. He never did get his gun out. Everything probably happened too quickly. I find myself standing in the doorway, having flung the door wide open at some point. Standing with his back to me is the same bandit that brought the tray with the food in. He's still holding it in his hands.

"Don't move an inch!" My voice comes out surprisingly hoarse. I barely recognize it as my own.

"I'm not moving!" the temporary waiter assures me in a frightened voice.

"One step and you're fucked! Did you see everything?"

"Yes."

"Then make a note of it. I told your boys before that they needed to get rid of the boss! Now I've had to do all the work for you."

"Alright, alright! I understand. I'll explain it."

"Who are you going to explain it to?"

"I'll explain it to the lads, that you came and you finished off Kiryukha!"

I nod, though of course he can't see my movements.

“That’s my boy. You’ve got the idea. Do you know why I killed him, or do I need to draw a diagram?”

Christ, what am I on about? Where are all these crazy words coming from? This isn’t a film or some role-playing game. Lying on the couch is a man killed by my own hand, and now I’m acting out some comedy in front of his assistant.

“Right! Now you stand here and you count to a hundred out loud. When you’re finished, you can go out into the yard and tell your lads that your new leader needs to pay a visit to the flat next to the shopkeeper’s. You know the one I mean. He should come alone, tomorrow at noon, and we’ll have a chat with him. Bear in mind that you’re all in our cross-hairs. So don’t go playing hide and seek, or it’ll all end in tears.”

I take two steps back and pull the door to. Keeping the pistol pointed at it, I move carefully back along the corridor to the room with the wardrobe stuck in the doorway. It’s only when I’m about half a mile from the bandits’ base that I finally snap out of the trance I’m in.

When Vitalik the Razor came out of the door to the building, Tolyan was the first to see him, and he nearly choked. The boss’s right-hand man looked so strange that Tolyan just froze with his spoon half way from his bowl to his mouth. The Razor was squeezing an empty tray in his trembling left hand while he braced against the door frame with his right. From the look of it, he’d just been given a fearsome crack over the head.

Tolyan nudged the guy next to him, who turned baffled to look at him. Tolyan gestured with his eyes towards the building.

“Hey, Razor, what’s up with you?” asked another of the bandits. Gavrish was a huge man, who nonetheless had a clear head and fast reactions. If he’d had slightly more brains, then who knows who’d be leading the gang?

“They got Kiryukha,” said Vitalik, finally letting go of the door.

“What? How? Who?”

“Dunno.”

“What do you mean?”

The bandits abandoned their meal.

“I took him his food, put the plate down. He grabbed his spoon and we started chatting. Then all of a sudden his face twisted somehow, he dropped his spoon, and started reaching for something. There was a cracking sound, and he just sagged. Then another one got him right in the throat. Then he died.”

“What are you on about?” asked Tolyan uncertainly. “Who else was in the room?”

“Nobody.”

“Then what happened?” asked Gavrish calmly.

“Then... Then he talked to me.”

“Who’s he?”

“I couldn’t see, could I? He just suddenly appeared behind me. I was too scared to turn round – Kiryukha was right there in front of me, blood spurting everywhere!”

“Alright, alright,” said Gavrish, interrupting the panic. “What did he say?”

“Like that we hadn’t listened to them, so they had to finish the job themselves. You know, they told us to bring them the boss, then one of us ratted on the deal, so they had to come over themselves.

“Who said to bring who where? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“That did happen,” said another of the bandits, Skinny Kolka, peeling himself away from the wall of the building, which he had been

conscientiously supporting for the duration of the conversation. “When they got us on the staircase in that fucking new building. Some cunt of theirs says, like, bring us your leader and we’ll do him. You go free. Kiryukha almost went apeshit when I told him. Didn’t believe it. He wouldn’t let me have a piece, neither. All I had was that bat, and see how it ended?”

“Fucking hell!” snorted Gavrish. “Bring them the leader, my arse! Did they ask for the Soviet Union gold reserve, too?”

“Said nothing about that,” answered Skinny, ignoring the joke. “But they weren’t joking about coming here, now, were they?”

“Right then,” the big man turned again to the Razor, “what happened next?”

“He said to get our new leader to pay a visit to that block of flats near the shopkeeper’s place. Like, we know the one he means. Then he says count to a hundred before you go, and I started counting.”

“Where did he go?”

“Fuck knows. I wasn’t going to turn around, was I? And the front door was still locked! It’s completely fucked up is what it is!” Razor was almost screaming.

“Maybe you dreamed it all? Maybe there wasn’t anybody there at all?” suggested Tolyan. “Come on, boys! Let’s go and check it out!”

Their inspection didn’t really reveal anything, however. On the floor, they found the empty pistol cartridges, but no footprints whatsoever. There were still some doors intact in the corridor, although the bandits had already broken down several of them. Now they broke down the rest. Still they didn’t manage to find anything of interest that could shine a light on what had happened.

“This is bullshit, isn’t it?” Gavrish sat down on the front steps and scratched his head. “Alright, so Kiryukha pissed in their chips somehow.

Clearly, they had it in for him one way or another. That I get. But what the fuck do they want from us?"

When I get home – there's no other way of referring to my basement now – I spend a little time just bouncing off the walls. All sorts of bizarre thoughts are swimming through my head. Do please explain, for example, why the hell I set a meeting with those gangbangers? What do I want from them? At the time, I guess I thought it would sound sinister and terrifying. At the time. But what am I going to do now? Let's assume that one of them actually keeps the appointment. Leaving aside the fact it's highly unlikely they'll be particularly pleased to see me, there's another problem – I've got absolutely nothing to offer them. There should be a purpose to any meeting, surely? Solving problems of some sort, agreeing on cooperation. But the only problem that me and these bandits have is that they want to kill me, isn't it? How are we going to cooperate on that, I ask you? On that basis, I really can't see what it is we have to discuss. It's a dead end. What I'm going to say, and to whom, I have absolutely no idea.

Unable to think of anything, I get my bottle of various blended brandies and, with an unshaking hand, pour myself a full glass. To hell with the lot of them, I want to get some sleep!

When I wake up, I lie on my back for a while, staring blankly at the ceiling. The light coming through the window is forming strange knots and loops on it. I try to identify some sort of order or pattern in them, but I don't get anywhere. It's a complete waste of time. So, without having come to any decision, I jump out of bed.

For breakfast today we have a tin of black olives and a tin of beans in tomato sauce. I heat the beans with a camping gas stove, pour them onto a plate and, after a moment's thought, splash some more brandy into a glass. True, not the whole glass this time – just a standard measure. By the by, some of my food store could easily be flogged off to the shopkeeper. Seriously, I'd get by just fine without those olives, for example. Tinned mushrooms aren't essential to my survival, either. Without my tinned meat, on the other hand, my life would lose much of its colour, especially as I don't see much prospect of getting fresh fruit or vegetables any time soon.

So, it's probably a good idea to swap some of these delicacies for simpler but much more nutritious food.

The decision taken, I quickly choose a certain number of tins and pack them in my backpack. My very own much-loved first-aid backpack. Its former contents I have now arranged on the shelves in my hideaway. Some medicines that I had extra stocks of I hid in a completely different place.

On my way to the shopkeeper's, I glance carefully around out of habit. My shotgun's in my hands, with the stock unfolded and a shell in the chamber. I'm ready to pull fast on the trigger if I notice the slightest sign of danger. However, nothing happens during my walk; nobody tries to ambush me or rob me. You'd guess the gangbangers are too busy choosing themselves a new boss. That'll keep them occupied for a while, at least. And it's very unlikely that any of them will want to miss that entertaining gabfest just to lie in wait for a potential lone shopper.

Again I hear the familiar clank of the peephole, the scrape of bolts, and then the heavy door of the shop swings open before me.

"Well, well!" says Sledgehammer, looking me over with an attentive eye, "I see you've spruced yourself up. And you've got a new piece. That's a beauty!"

"It's not the only one," I answer with the same cheerful tone.

I pull the Sig Sauer out of my belt and place it in the basket.

I look up at the guard. Oh, balls! I forgot to do one more important thing – unload my guns. I take the pistol in my hands again, pull out the magazine, and pull back the bolt. The bullet flies off somewhere into the depths of the shop. I put the gun back in the basket along with the magazine, and then do the same with the shotgun. This goes a little better for me. At the very least, the shells don't go flying off anywhere. Once I'm rid of my guns, I open my backpack and show its contents to the guard. He nods, and I enter the shop.

“Not bad,” says the shopkeeper, examining the goods I’m offering for sale. “So, what do you want for them?”

“Soup and tinned meat. And I could do with some bullets for that pistol over there.”

“What sort of gun’s that, then?”

“It’s a Sig Sauer,” answers Sledgehammer from the door. “That gun’s the shit, too. Wouldn’t mind one myself. Where did you get it from?”

“There was this guy who liked throwing grenades around. Then he threw one the wrong way, and I ended up with his pistol.”

The guard chuckles.

Our negotiations finished fairly quickly, and the results were more than satisfying. Or, at least, I’d been counting on much less. I head back to the door, ready to pick up my guns.

“Have you got a minute?” asks Sledgehammer.

“I’ve got nowhere to be.”

“You haven’t forgotten my offer, have you?”

“Course not. Already working on it.”

“With any success?”

“Well, those thugs who were shaking down lone shoppers round here have got something else to keep them busy. Their boss – Kiryukha, if you know him – copped it. So now they’re choosing a new one. True, there’s no guarantee he’ll survive any longer, but that’ll depend on how smart he is. At any rate, they won’t be round here today,

“Good work,” says Sledgehammer, nodding. “I’m a man of my word, so come and see us when the job’s done.”

I step outside and pressing my back to the door I hurriedly shove the shells back into the magazine of my shotgun. I reload the pistol, too, and stick it back in its place. I've fixed up a special extra pocket inside my waistcoat using a sleeve ripped off a coat. Sure, I'm no expert at sewing combat gear. It looks clumsy and crude, but at least the pistol isn't sticking out of my belt and jabbing me when I walk.

When I've gone fifty meters, I turn a corner, then sharply come back round it. Three men are coming towards me from the nearest building. One of them I recognize, and I've no desire to meet them whatsoever.

I glance cautiously around the corner. Paying no attention to the world around them, the trio are marching purposefully towards an already very familiar entryway. "I don't mean to be a lout, but what the fuck's that all about?" Those lines come from a poem by Leonid Filatov, if I remember correctly. At any rate, nothing more fitting comes to mind right now. One has to assume that this is the new leader on his way to our meeting. Which makes it quite reasonable to ask why he's got company. Was someone hard of hearing? Or does he think he's immune to bullets or something? Either way, I've got bad news for him.

"What are you on about, mate?" whines the voice in my head. "Think you're the Terminator now, do you? Well then, I've got some big news for you, too. You still can't shoot for shit!"

That's true enough – I'm no sharpshooter. So, we'll have to do this differently. I keep myself hidden behind the wall and carefully watch what the trio are up to. They approach the building and split up. One of them heads into the entryway, while the other two sit down on the steps and look around. A few minutes pass, and then the guy who went inside comes back. He takes a seat on the steps, and one of the two who was keeping lookout now opens the front door.

So, that guy was doing a little reconnaissance. No doubt he took a look up the staircase, ran up and back down again, and tried the doors. Not finding anyone, he came back to report. Which probably means that the guy who's just gone inside is the new boss, while the guys now sitting on the steps are his bodyguards. Technically, you can't fault them. I said he should

come alone, and he's gone into the building all by himself. I never said the others couldn't sit around outside. Clever, aren't they?

But then we're not complete idiots either. The bandits have one major advantage on their side – there's no way of walking into the entryway without going through them. Walking in. But did anybody ever say there was only one way of getting into the building? As it happens, I've got another access route. Once again, I circle the building and approach the fire escape. Just why are people so lazy, eh? I bet they've seen this ladder more than once, and I bet they've even worked out where it leads to. Would it really have been so hard to get one of the bandits to sit at the corner of the building? Then they'd be able to see the entryway and the fire escape at the same time. Laziness can take years off your life sometimes. Sometimes it can add them on, too, of course. But that's certainly not the case if you're a bandit, and certainly not in the current situation.

I climb carefully up the slippery rungs of the ladder. It rained not so long ago, and they've still not dried. Now I'm on the roof. I cross to the already familiar balcony. Clearly someone's been poking around in the flat. Everything's upside down. You'd assume the bandits took special care with their search the last time – knocked all the doors to pieces and went through every flat.

I step to the flat door and stop. Across the door frame is stretched a thin gray thread. A tripwire again? I crouch down and look carefully towards the corner. Where would the bandits get a grenade from anyway? The thread just holds an ordinary fork against the door frame. If I step forward, I'll snap the thread, and the fork will fall from over a metre onto the stone floor. That's something you'd have to be stone deaf not to hear.

It's an interesting little trick. It means the bandits have someone with reasonably quick wits. From the look of it, the jerry-rigged alarm system I found earlier was also his work. Fair play to him. There may well be other surprises further down the staircase. Which is why I have to move cautiously and keep a close eye beneath my feet. And elsewhere, too. Good Lord, it seems like walking around in my socks is going to be a habit of mine soon. How many times have I already gone down a staircase this way?

I sling my shotgun behind my back and take out my pistol. In the circumstances, its main advantage – the comparative quiet of a shot – may be of vital importance. Deep in my heart, I hope the new boss hasn't come here to fight. Surely the last effort to prove how tough they were cost them too much?

One flight down, then another. I can already hear the bandits' boss muttering something to himself right there in that very flat. And why not? There's no reason for him to think he has to be silent. The only entry from the roof goes into the staircase next door, this staircase has been thoroughly checked by his bodyguard, and just in case they have their makeshift early-warning system. So, there he is, happily humming away to himself. Anybody approaching the building will undoubtedly be noticed by his guards. The ground-floor windows have grates on them, so there's no way of getting in there. I lie down on the landing between the ground floor and the first floor, and get the front door in my sights. Now we wait. Sooner or later, the bandit's patience will run out, and he'll head for the exit. That's when I'll catch him. Let's hope neither of his bodyguards decides to bother him before that.

A minute, another, ten minutes go by. Then I hear movement below. So, the man's done waiting. He's on his way. Light falls through the open door then fades away. On the landing appears the massive form of the bandit.

"Stop right there!" My whistling whisper makes the bandit flinch.

I whisper because I learned long ago a simple truth from some pranksters and other reprobates of my acquaintance – a whisper cannot be identified. From what my friends told me, there's no law enforcement agency in the world that can tell one person's whisper from another, they all sound much the same.

"Why didn't you come alone."

"I came in here on my own. Nobody said I couldn't leave guards outside."

“With brains like that, you’ll go a long way. If nobody stops you.”

“What do you need from us?”

“There can’t be any trouble for the shopkeeper’s business. Otherwise there’ll be trouble for other people.”

“We’ve got to do something to get by. Everybody wants to eat – every day, too.”

Good on the guy. He gets to the point and he knows what he wants. He’s got the interests of his gang at heart. On the other hand, he isn’t rejecting my offer outright.

“You’ll be compensated. The shopkeeper will give you a discount. How you choose to use it is up to you. How does that grab you?”

The bandit thinks for a while.

“Fuck knows. Alright, it’s good enough.”

“Excellent. Keep your boys round about and make sure there’s no trouble around here. The shopkeeper’s guards won’t bother you, we’ll sort it out with them. Tomorrow at noon, one of your guys should be at the shop door. One of ours will meet him, take him inside, and introduce him to the shopkeeper. He and he alone will do your trading for you. Are you OK with that?”

This time the boss took far less time to think it over.

“Deal. What else?”

“That’s all for now. There may be other work for you, but we’ll discuss that later. Gather more people and get armed. The shopkeeper will help you with ammo. Don’t go near the soldiers, especially the foreign ones. They’re working with us. At least, they are in some matters. When we need you, we’ll find you.”

“What if I need something?”

“Draw a slash on the front door to this staircase. When it’s wiped off, that means we’ll meet here on the following day. Just the same as today. Any questions?”

“No, that’s all clear. Does it matter how we get the job done?”

“Go nuts if you want. Get a strong gang together, and the price for your work goes up. You get the gist? Now, go back into the flat and count to a hundred. Then you can go.”

The bandit turns around and disappears down the corridor. I go back upstairs in my socks, just as I came down. My throat’s dry. You try whispering just five phrases in a row. I have reason to hope I didn’t mess that up too much and the guy believed at least a half of what I told him. At any rate, he didn’t resort to shooting, and that’s a good start. For the rest, we’ll see tomorrow. If he sends somebody to the meet, that’ll mean he’s accepted my offer. And if that’s the case, the shopkeeper will owe me.

That said, the whole thing’s beginning to remind me of that old joke about the man who buys eggs for a ruble a piece, boils them, and sells them on for the same price. When the other market traders ask him what on earth the point is, he answers that first of all he gets the water the eggs are boiled in, and secondly, he’s in on the action. I’m basically forgoing my egg – the discount the shopkeeper offered me – in favour of the bandits. And the only benefit I get is that I’m in on the action. As a voice in the wings, it’s true, but I guess that’s not such a bad position for somebody with no military skill whatsoever.

To say that the gang were waiting impatiently for the return of their newly elected leader would be to a massive understatement. Too much was riding on the meeting for it to be treated as a run-of-the-mill event. Moreover, in some minds the idea had already seeded and grown that it might be time to get the fuck out of there and join up with somebody a little more successful. This meeting was going to answer a lot of questions. That’s why, when Gavrish appeared in the doorway, absolutely everyone crowded round him. All talk ceased immediately, and a tense silence hung in the air.

Walking over to his place, the boss placed his assault rifle on the floor, leaning it on his armchair. Both chair and rifle he had inherited after Kiryukha's mysterious killing.

Gavrish sat down and ran his eyes over the assembled crowd.

"Well?" asked Skinny Kolka, unable to contain himself. "What happened, then? Go on, tell us!"

"I had a meeting," said the boss, shrugging his shoulders. "We had a chat about life."

"Who did they send?"

"Who the fuck knows? The arsehole never showed himself. And the way he spoke... Well, he was whispering actually. Still, it was all quite clear. Basically, we chewed it over, and it's all going to be alright."

"What do you mean?" asked Tolyan, sensing something amiss.

"The shopkeeper's going to be our friend from now on. He'll give us a discount. In return, we make sure there's no trouble round here. Any stragglers we run straight off."

"So, it was the shopkeeper's boy who did Kiryukha, was it?"

"Not fucking likely," said Gavrish, shaking his head. "As I understand it, these guys move in higher circles. The shopkeeper's got his own deal with them. By the way, it was these sods who set the grunts on us. That was all set up by them."

"Shite!" said Skinny. "I knew there was something going on!"

"Yeah," nodded the boss. "Now they're saying there can't be any aggro. We don't touch the grunts, and they'll ignore us. And he told me to get more people. Said it'll be worth it for us. Find some lads who know what they're about. And we need to choose one of ours to do business with the shopkeeper. Tomorrow, they'll make the introductions."

Kolka shook his head thoughtfully.

“It all seem a little too fucking good to be true. What’s our end of the deal?”

“Nothing. Or at least nothing for now. They said, like, if we need you, we’ll come find you. Obviously, they’ll want something from us, but what?”

“And you’re saying this guy never even showed his face?” asked another of the bandits suspiciously.

“I’m telling you, it was all whispers behind my back. Then the business with count to a hundred before you go. And, by the way, I went through the whole staircase afterwards – not a soul. The clever bastard vanished into thin air. Just like with Kiryukha.”

Chapter 6

Another day, another bunch of trouble.

As is now habitual, I fortify myself with my blend of brandies. At this rate, I'll be an alcoholic soon.

Digging through my collection of looted weapons, I choose a shotgun and a selection of knives. I can't go see the shopkeeper empty-handed, can I? I also take a few packs of cigarettes and some other bits and pieces.

Today I take another route to the meeting place. It's what they say in all the books – routine may make life easier, but it also makes it shorter. I have no desire to test the truth of that in practice. Someone else can give it a go if they want.

Sledgehammer was all sweetness and light today. Examining the goods I'd brought, he just shook his head.

"I've done what you asked!" I inform him enthusiastically as I step inside. "In an hour, there'll be a representative from those gangbangers here. From now on, they'll do what you ask. I've signed them up to keep order in the neighbourhood."

"Out of the good of their hearts?"

"You did promise a discount. After all, you don't need thugs round here, you need customers, don't you? It wouldn't be hard to take these ones down, but then a new lot would turn up. Will you want me to shoot them, too? I don't mind pulling the trigger."

Having disarmed, I head towards the shopkeeper. But this time Pavel leaves his post and follows me to let Mr. Ogryzko know what he's thinking.

Then we got down to more normal business. I've had to haggle over all sorts of things in my time. True, it was mostly smalltime stuff. It was all kinds of electronics we were peddling then, but I do retain some skills from the period and they came in useful. To cut a long story short, I got myself a discount, and managed to get a good price for all my goods. Better still, the shopkeeper took the weapons with unconcealed delight.

It's already noon. Time to meet the guy the bandits have sent. Sledgehammer opens the door for me.

"Take your pistol," he says, nodding to the basket. "You can even load it here if you want."

Is that a sign of trust? There's still the other guard, who has no part in our conversation, and is observing everything carefully with his gun in his hand. So, while there certainly is a risk, it's not as great as you might think. What if I...

I flick the bullets from the magazine and put it back in the pistol empty. From the look of it, everything's in place. But in reality the gun's empty and I'm no danger to anyone.

Pavel chuckles, shakes his head, and opens the door. The bolts slide shut behind me, and I'm out on the street all alone. With an empty pistol. My shotgun's still with Sledgehammer in the basket.

And this is how I'm heading off to meet the bandits, is it? Yes, unfortunately it is. But there is a reason for it. Bravado, if you like, but also careful analysis of the situation. When it comes down to it, I don't represent any real threat to the gang. I'm no great shooter, and I've never learned any tactical cunning. If they want to kill me, they'll go ahead and shoot from a distance, and I won't know anything about it until it's too late. You can't just play by their rules, especially not on their turf.

But now let's look at the situation from a different perspective. A guy comes to a meeting. Obviously, he's armed, because only a complete idiot would walk round here without a weapon on him. Moreover, it's a pretty impressive gun. Which, as it happens, I barely know how to use. But it's not like that's carved on my forehead.

So, let's proceed. Along comes this guy, meets the bandit, and leads him into the shop. At the entrance, obviously, the gang's man will have his weapons taken away from him. But I'll hold on to mine, because there are no bullets in it and the guards know that.

What does the gangbanger see? He sees that the guy he's meeting isn't particularly afraid of anyone, seeing as he's happy to walk around with nothing but a pistol. After all, only an overconfident idiot would go up against shotguns and assault rifles with just a pistol. That, or a hardened pro.

Secondly – and this is much more important – the shopkeeper's guards won't be taking this guy's gun away. Which means he's one of them, or they trust him so much that they make an exception.

Moreover, I don't have to say anything to anyone. A smart guy (and they won't be sending an idiot) will see it all for himself, and come to far-reaching conclusions. Sure, there is a chance that it'll all go very differently from how I picture it, and they'll just gun me down as soon as we meet. Well, then someone will be getting a new pistol, I guess.

I'm tired. Tired of running up and down stairs, ducking and diving, and lying to everyone I meet. When it comes down to it, I'm just the most ordinary guy. No, I'm not a hero, unfortunately. Meantime they all go around as if they've got no worries at all and their strength never fails. Who was it that stopped me going to the gym all that time? That's right, my own idleness.

Walking around twenty metres from the shop, I take a seat on a bench. I'm not going any further, else I'll be out of the guards' sight. What if they think I've hidden a spare magazine away somewhere?

Hold up! A lone figure appears in the gateway. It's the representative. He did come after all. I stand up and make a beckoning gesture with my hand – come on over.

The bandits' representative turned out to be a skinny guy with a very cunning look on his face. Perhaps he'd been in sales himself at some time.

"Alright! Gavrish sent me," he announces as he's approaching.

"Good," I nod in answer. "I'm..."

Who am I? Who sent me? What should I call the mysterious party who's pulling the strings from behind the scenes to enhance his reputation? The guy who crawls around and whispers creepily. The one whose bullets sent the former boss to his grave. The one whose orders sent the soldiers to my house. Should I say that that's me, that is? What other brilliant ideas are there floating round in my inflamed imagination? No, now I've started this charade, I'd better keep it going.

"The Predator sent me. Said I should meet you, make the introductions, and all that jazz."

"Who is this Predator?"

"When he whispers in your ear and tickles your chin with his gun, then you'll find out. There are some questions it's better not to ask. If you want to live much longer, that is. Shall we go?"

We approach the shop door. The guards are watching us, the bolts scrape, and the door opens.

"Got any weapons?" Sledgehammer asks my companion. "If so, put them in the basket."

What's interesting is that my shotgun isn't in the basket. It's standing in one corner. Which means I can take it that the guard is playing along with me a little. He obviously saw straight through my little game. And, as

it’s no skin off his nose to play along with the trick, why not help me out a bit?

The rest was simple. The bandits’ guy listened to the conditions the shopkeeper set for their deal, then on his part gave a solemn oath of absolute and total loyalty. He even put a few things on the counter that he’d brought to trade. That brought the official proceedings to an end, and we were led back to the door.

“Why don’t you hang back a couple of minutes?” says Sledgehammer to me suddenly, “there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

The door slams behind the bandits’ representative, and I turn to the guard.

“So, that’s that, my friend,” says Pavel, sitting back down. “Have a seat, take the load off your feet."

Without objection, I take the place offered to me.

“I can see you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, and not only...” He spins a finger in the air. “So, one of us had an idea as to how your talents might best be employed.”

“Go on.”

“There’s a rumour going round,” he continues, “that our chief has a new rival. In principle, there’s nothing wrong with that. Competition keeps you on your toes, they say. But there’s competition and there’s competition.”

“What specifically bothers you about this rival?”

“See, as I’m sure you know, there’s all sorts of trader. Us, we’re honest businessmen. We don’t charge rip-off prices, and we won’t take the shirt off your back. This bloke, on the other hand. Well, they say all sorts of things about him.”

“But where did he come from all of sudden?” I ask with surprise. “It’s only a couple of weeks since this whole mess began. Well, three. And already people have that much bad to say about him?”

“You’re an observant lad, aren’t you?” Sledgehammer chuckles. “You’re right, he didn’t appear out of thin air yesterday. Not even two weeks ago, either. This guy has been making a noise in the city for two years already. He’s based somewhere over by the port, and he’s always played fast and loose in his business. He’s the sort of bastard who has no scruples whatsoever. Offer him a handful of false teeth with real ones mixed in and he’ll take them without blinking. His reputation’s so bad that in all honesty we assumed one of his debtors had managed to do away with him in all this chaos. You’d have trouble counting the number of people he’s pissed off. No such fucking luck, unfortunately. The bastard’s resurfaced.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Go and see him. Offer to sell him something. His prices are of no particular interest to us, but we’d love to know how he’s set up and how he does business.”

It’s a funny sort of job he’s offering – they send me off to deal with someone who’s obviously a criminal, someone who even in the past was not particularly law-abiding, and who now could go off at just about any moment. Not to mention that I have difficulty imagining how even to talk to someone like that. It may not even be that easy to get anywhere near him. If he’s some kind of gangster, then his security is likely to be even more serious than Mr. Ogryzko’s. It’s far from certain that I’ll get out of there alive.

I explain my doubts to Sledgehammer. He says nothing for a while, turning something over in his head.

“Here’s what I can tell you. In the past, there weren’t many people who could get to see him, you’re right about that much. He’s really not a public figure, it’s true. But in the current situation, he can’t afford his old airs and graces. There’s not much of his old client-base left.”

“What do you mean? Surely there’s fewer shops now, too?”

“He was a drug dealer, if you haven’t worked it out yet. Now he’s had to change his product line altogether. He does, of course, have some resources, but even they have their limits.”

I scratch my head thoughtfully. Clearly, they wouldn’t make this sort of offer to just anyone. Can I take it as a sign of trust, or does the shopkeeper just want to use a short-sighted fool for his own purposes? Either could be the case. Let’s take a closer look at this. What are the upsides for me? God knows. Sledgehammer hasn’t said anything about that yet. As for downsides, well, the fact that they could kill me is a pretty clear and comprehensible negative.

Alright then, what if I refuse? In that case they’ll give the task to one of the bandits – the bandits who I’ve just introduced to them. No doubt they’ll be able to find some brainless tough guy who’ll agree to do it. Sledgehammer won’t even have to beat around the bush with him. He can just tell the bandits what’s really going on, and that’ll be enough for them. Then all my efforts will go up in smoke. Again I’ll be running from basement to basement, jumping at every sound.

“Fuck that! Let’s say I agree. What do I get out of it?”

“What do you actually want?”

There were lots of things I wanted, not least of them to find out why we were in the situation we were in.

“That’s a question I can answer for you. Not fully. If you know the score, you’ll realize there’s things that even we don’t know,” says the guard shrugging his shoulders.

According to Sledgehammer, the events in Tarkov didn’t happen suddenly. It was me, sitting in a locked office and up to my ears in all sorts of network problems, who managed to ignore what was going on. Others who were smarter had long had an idea of what was coming. They made their conclusions and acted accordingly.

The conflict between the transnational corporations and the state authorities had not begun yesterday. But until now everything had been kept within the bounds of reason. Problems had normally been resolved through the courts or similar channels. It had never got, thank heaven, to all-out warfare. But then in the last year, someone had got the bit between their teeth. Those same transnationals began, covertly at first but then more and more openly, to defy the powers that be. From time to time this even led to shootouts. Somehow it turned out that it wasn't just the corporations' security services involved, but also similar and sometimes only semi-official organizations employed by the state. Pavel wasn't keen to elaborate on the subject, and I decided not to pester him with further questions as long as he told me about everything else.

He did. It all started when yet another shootout between the security service of a transnational and the local OMON ended up with casualties among the civilian population. Who had actually opened fire on the crowd it was now too late to establish, but there were victims. The security services and private armies on both sides – the Bears and USEC – ended up in a bitter stand-off. The city government clutched their heads in their hands and announced a general evacuation. To begin with, everything went more or less smoothly. Transport arrived on time and people were dispatched in an orderly fashion. Then someone opened fire at one of the departure points, and the crowd scattered in all directions. Somebody shouted that they should all go to the port, as there would be ships arriving. Others decided to make their own way out of the city. That's when accidents started to happen, as everyone wanted to put their foot down and nobody wanted to give way. In most cases, it was the well-off people in powerful new cars who never even imagined that they might have to let someone else go in front of them.

As is often the case, it didn't take long for opportunists to seize the chance to enrich themselves at the expense of others' misfortune, and the unlucky drivers whose cars were involved in collisions were robbed on the spot. Then cars started coming under attack even before they'd crashed. All efforts by the police to prevent this came to nothing. Some offenders were arrested, others were shot, but it made no difference to the big picture. Most of the forces of law and order were occupied with the evacuation, and there

weren't enough boots on the street to stop the sudden wave of violence that was sparked. The whole situation got completely out of hand.

At the end of the third day of the evacuation, complete chaos began to grip the city. Moreover, much of what happened had no logical explanation whatsoever – the absolutely incomprehensible gunning down of completely innocent people, an utterly unprovoked attack by unknown assailants on a police station, and other similar phenomena.

As a result, on the fourth day Tarkov was in the midst of a completely inexplicable situation. There was no action forthcoming from the powers that be, most municipal services had stopped working, and anarchic armed groups were roaming the streets, opening fire unimpeded. Ministry of the Interior troops soon turned up, but instead of heading straight into the city and restoring order with an iron fist, they began to put up roadblocks on every route out of the danger zone, even forest footpaths. A rumour went round that some kind of radioactive poison had been released in the air. The next rumour concerned a possible accident at a chemical factory. Which of these rumours was true, nobody knew, but from that moment the evacuation was brought to a sudden halt. The appearance of the blue helmets of a UN peacekeeping force added further fuel to the flames. By that time nobody had a clue what was going on. The government issued a statement concerning the situation that left everyone even further in the dark and crushed all further attempts at organization.

"So, my fine friend, here we are sitting in a great big pressure cooker, and somebody blew the lid off. Why? Nobody knows. Getting out of here won't be possible for a while. You're not advised to try anything on your own. There are rumours that some people are still being evacuated, but nobody ever knows exactly when, how, or where to. But you've still got to live, haven't you? That's where people like our boss come in. He's a man with a sharp mind, and if he's a little greedy, well, he is after all a trader, not a philanthropist. And those very same UN peacekeepers are also selling stuff, not to mention the rest of them. Everybody's got to get by. And everybody needs some middlemen to oil the wheels. That's how we go on surviving. How long this will go on for and how it will end, nobody has the slightest clue. Everybody's lying, and the government more than anyone.

Nobody trusts anybody. If you want to live – not to have a comfortable life, but just to go on breathing – then you need to make some effort. Otherwise you might as well give up the ghost. If you work on your own, you'll end up dead, and it'll be a nasty death, too. So, you need to pick a team." And with that he finishes.

To barter with this supposed rival, Mr. Ogryzko gave me two syringes filled with morphine. The same or similar can be found in certain special first-aid kits. Apart from being a powerful analgesic, it's a substance that's in high demand amongst drug addicts. Considering that those were the people who used to make up a significant part of the rival's former client base, there was every chance that this particular product would rouse considerable interest in him. And that, of course, would give me a better chance of getting close to him. I was also given some other goods that might be of interest to a broader range of shoppers.

The last peaceful night in my basement.

So, who have you become? Not so long ago you were just a normal, utterly unremarkable system administrator. You did your job, put right other people's mistakes, chased the girls a little, and considered yourself a fully operational human being. But what about now? Instead of the keyboard I'm accustomed to, there's a twelve-gauge shotgun in my hands, and instead of the mouse I knew down to the tiniest scratch on it, now I've got a heavy pistol with a silencer. That's quite some administrator, very much part of the system. Anyway, it's time for bed. Tomorrow morning I'll be leaving these already familiar surroundings, my second home. Will I come back? Who knows? But I'll do my very best.

My travelling method of moving from one hiding place to another demonstrated its worth within the first couple of hours. I managed in good time to notice shadows flashing on the other side of the road. Slipping back round the corner completely automatically, I take the safety catch off my shotgun. I look around. There's a doorway nearby.

As a result of gutting other people's flats, I now have a well-developed ability to open front doors. Certainly, you can just knock them down with your shoulder, but then your shoulder's going to ache for several

days after. You may be able to smash the lock with a good hard kick, too. As long as you don't mind hopping round on your other foot for a while. You can also shoot out the lock with a shotgun, and that's probably the most effective method, unless you consider it a problem that you'll attract the attention of everyone in the area. Some of them will come running to loot the flat, and others will be after the shotgun you've just used to open it. For obvious reasons, neither scenario is particularly desirable.

However, while I was looking round the garage at my old place, I found a fascinating gadget. It looked something like a pair of scissors with a jackscrew fixed between the two blades for some reason. Maybe it comes in useful for fixing cars, I've no idea. I'm not an expert, so I really can't say. But I do know that if you put the handles of the scissors between a door and its frame, the jackscrew can be worked quietly and quiet effectively. The panels of the door come away from the frame, and no locks are able to stop them. True, it's a process that takes some time. Sometimes you need to give a helping hand with a collapsible crowbar. (To be more exact, it's actually screwed together from several parts). However, it's worth it for the result.

Right now, for example, having climbed to the third floor, I silently break the front door of one of the flats. A flat with windows that look out on the street I'm interested in. Once inside, hiding behind the curtains, I watch what's going on below. What's going on is that a fair-sized bunch of guys in uniform are knocking over a Tarbank security van. As they lack any special equipment, the process is heavy going and accompanied by a typical stream of obscenities. To give the unknown group due credit, they have remembered to place lookouts. I can see two, but it seems reasonable to assume that they aren't the only ones on guard. In which case I made the right decision not to try crossing this street two or three hundred metres from the van. Bullets make short work of that sort of distance, as I'm sure you know. Their efforts to get inside the van are meanwhile reaching their logical conclusion. There's a new volley of swearing, followed by an extended shriek of metal. The swearing immediately ceases, and the crowd of men in camouflage spreads out along the street, taking up positions around the nearby buildings and entryways. A minute passes, then another, and then two men appear from inside the van carrying heavy canvas sacks.

The two of them and the whole camouflaged crew disappear rapidly round the corner, gathering their sentries on the way.

Ah, well, they're certainly not the gang I'm looking for. On the other hand, wherever they go will be peaceful for a while. Either they'll get rid of anyone waiting in ambush along the way, or the ambushers will sensibly move out of their path to avoid catching a stray bullet. I get myself together fairly sharply, and follow in the tracks of the camouflaged group. It's a peculiar tactic, admittedly, but right now I've got nothing better.

Unfortunately, our paths diverge quite quickly. They turn off to the left, while my path lies straight ahead. It's there, in the region of the old household services centre, that the guy I'm looking for lives.

To tell the truth, after I'd been entrusted this job and clarified a few details, I took heart a little. The reason why is that among my acquaintances there used to be one particular interesting character. Mishka Dronov, despite his remarkable talents as a programmer, was also a near hopeless drug addict. There was nothing he hadn't tried. It all started with relatively harmless plant-based substances, but then his repertoire expanded to include all sorts of harder drugs, among them the notorious crystal meth and other such horrors. He had tried to give up more than once, but he could never last more than a week. Various doctors had declared Mishka a hopeless case, he'd lost his job, and only a few old friends would occasionally throw some particularly complicated coding tasks his way. When that happened, a transformation would take place, and before us once again would stand the old Mishka. He was the master, a first-class specialist for whom there was no such thing as an insoluble problem. Unfortunately, however, the master only ever appeared for a very short while. Having finished the job and taken the money, he'd immediately be running after his next fix.

He was the man I wanted to visit. If Mishka didn't know all the places in town where drugs were sold, then nobody did. I only had about a kilometre to go before I reached him, but unfortunately night was falling around me and I had to decide what I was going to do – try to find Mishka despite the dark, or find a secluded spot to lie up in. Prudence got the upper hand in the end, and I found myself climbing the stairs in yet another block

of flats to bust open another door with my “scissors”. I’ll sleep, have a bite to eat, and continue my search at dawn.

It’s never easy to get a good night’s sleep in a new place, and this flat was no exception to the rule. Although I found a big soft couch to spread out on, my sleep was nonetheless shallow and jerky. As soon as I nodded off, another resounding shot would ring out on the street. Then for a couple of hours it was relatively quiet, but just before dawn someone gave out a baleful scream as if they were slowly being cut in pieces. Quiet possibly they were. I wouldn’t be in the least surprised.

Out of habit, I hide behind the curtains and take a look at the street. Yup, the guy who was screaming clearly had his reasons. There he is, look, hanging over the fence round some building. Not just hanging, as it turns out, he’s clearly been impaled on one of the fence’s iron poles. Some unknown “pranksters” had lifted the unfortunate fellow up and brought his back down with all their strength onto the iron spike. The guy must have died an agonizing death – the poles of the fence were covered in something dark that must have been his blood.

Apart from the fresh corpse, there’s nobody else about on the street. Stepping carefully out of the front door with my gun at the ready, I quickly cross the road. Throwing a glance at the corpse, I see that on the fence just a little to the left of where he’s hanging strange symbols have been scrawled using something dark. They seem both very familiar but also completely incomprehensible. I turn a corner, press against the wall and look around. There it is – Mishka’s house. I can see the roof from here. I only have just over a kilometre to cover – or only four hundred metres as the crow flies – and I’ll be where I need to be.

Satisfied with the death of the guy on the fence, the unknown thugs who killed him are sleeping it off somewhere. Or at least nobody bothers me on the final stretch of my journey. Once again I take off my boots, once again I climb the staircase in only my socks. Who knows who might be visiting my old friend? I’ve seen all sorts at his flat in my time, so it would come as no surprise to find some wasted junkie hanging round there now. For a while, I stand on the landing and consider the situation. There’s no getting round the likelihood of an unpleasant encounter. The sort where I

open the door and someone bashes me over the head with all their strength. So, no, I'm not going straight into his flat. Not because I particularly fear a blow to the head. After all, if someone hits me, I can always shoot them in response. But what if that someone turns out to be my old friend Mishka, off his head from the withdrawal symptoms from whatever junk he's currently using? Who am I going to talk to then?

I look around. All the flat doors on this staircase have been smashed down in the crudest way. Somebody clearly tried to break some of them in with their shoulder, while others were rabidly hacked to pieces with an axe. And I think I can guess who did it. No doubt my old friend was looking for a hit. Frankly, the building he lived in was hardly an upper-class establishment. The residents were ordinary workers. Mishka himself ended up here after three or four changes of address, gradually moving down in the world from the luxurious flat he once owned to this tiny studio on the second floor. I doubt very much that his desperate searching uncovered anything useful. Even during normal times there'd have been nothing here to take. Examining the doors, I notice some shreds of paper with an official stamp on them. Clearly, they tried to evacuate this building properly, even going so far as to officially seal the flats. That means by definition there couldn't have been anything of value inside. At some point, Mishka must have realized this. If that's the case, then my friend must be suffering the most unholy torment right now. That's terrible, of course – he's really not a bad guy. On the other hand, he'll be ready to do anything to get his hands on that syringe of morphine.

You think that's wrong of me? Cynical and calculating? Well, have you got any better ideas?

Still... I remember how he would look at us sometimes. There we were, successful and well-dressed, with our new cars, while he was slumped unshaven in a pile of trash and squalor. The contrast was striking back then. What would it be like now?

I'm relatively comfortably dressed, carrying a good gun, and reasonably well-equipped. What about Mishka? Might my old friend not have the desire to knock me on the bonce with something the moment I turn my back to him? Then there's the trip to this new shopkeeper, which is also

beset with risk on all sides. Considering how well I use it, can I really rely on my gun? No, in all honesty I can't. No matter how fearsome I might look, I'm not really a dangerous opponent. On the other hand, I might easily provoke a defensive reaction, which could involve firing first and asking questions later. I therefore take a few more steps and walk into a looted flat. It's a mess in here. Everything's been turned upside down. All the clothes have been ripped out of the cupboards. I take a good look round, then remove my waistcoat and stuff it along with my shotgun under a pile of rags. After thinking for a while, I pull down my trousers, take some sticking plasters from my first-aid kit, and use them to tape my pistol to my leg. Pulling it out from here won't be easy, and I certainly won't be able to do it quickly. However, nobody's going to find it without a very thorough search. Moving a couch away from the wall, I place behind it my backpack and most of the goods I have with me. Now I don't look like someone who's worth mugging. I do still have the two syringes of morphine and a few other bits and pieces that I can try to sell to the shopkeeper. This way, it'll also make perfect sense why I'm coming to see him. It's one of his old clients who's brought me, and I'm in desperate need of just about any food or kit available. One look at me and that's easy enough to believe. I'm unarmed, and I don't have any proper clothes.

Chapter 7

So, now I can go pay Mishka a visit. I step out onto the landing and give the front door of his flat a firm shove. Against all my expectations, his place turns out not to be a complete shitpile. Either he's already sold everything, or he never had anything in the first place. Glancing into the kitchen, I notice a picturesque mess of open tins and empty bottles – just what you'd expect in this type of flat. If I remember correctly, it's always been like this here. Now let's take a look in the room.

Mishka, thank heaven, is alone. He's spread out on the mattress he uses for a bed, fast asleep. It would appear the withdrawal isn't bothering him too much. Interesting. I won't wake him yet, I'll just take a little look round the room.

On his desk, I find the first major surprise almost straight away – a powerful professional laptop with cables connecting to some sort of unknown device. I open the lid and see the battery light winking at me in a welcoming green colour. In other words, the battery's fully charged. How, I wonder? It's a fair time since there's been mains electricity in the city. This is not what I expected.

I close the lid and sit down next to Mishka, gently tapping him on the shoulder.

"What the...? Get the fuck off me!"

"Mishka! Hey, Mishka! Time to get up. Mother's brought your glass of milk."

He rolls over onto his back, opens his eyes, and gawps at me in astonishment for a while.

“Denis? What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d pop in and visit an old friend.”

Grunting, Mishka gets out of his bed, wanders over to his desk, and pulls out from under it an open bottle. Judging by the label, it’s mineral water. He takes a few gulps and then turns back to me. He’s also trying to throw the jacket on the back of his chair over the laptop without my noticing.

“How the hell did you get here?”

Strange, but Mishka doesn’t look anything like a drug addict. Still half asleep he may be, but I know him well. I’ve seen him in all sorts of conditions. Something isn’t right here.

“It is a kind of hell outside, and there’s only a few reasons to brave it, as you know. I need to eat, and I could do with getting a little better equipped. You can see for yourself what I’m dressed in. If it rains, I’m fucked. I’ll be soaked through, and it’s not like there’s a pharmacy anywhere.”

“That’s clear enough. But why come here?” asks my old friend in surprise.

“Well, you always did know where to get stuff from.”

This time I see a spark of interest in his eyes.

“And let’s say I still do. My stuff isn’t what you’re looking for, is it? Or have I missed something?”

That’s a strange thing to say. Out of the corner of my eye I see an axe with a damaged blade in the corner of the room. In all probability, that’s the weapon that Mishka used to smash in the doors of the neighbouring flats in search of anything he could exchange for a hit. That wasn’t so long ago, but what I see before me now is a comparatively normal guy asking some very unwelcome questions. I don’t like it one bit. It’s a rarity to find Mishka in

this state. As a rule, he's only this together when he's doing an important job. He takes his dose and then he's completely clear-headed. For a while, he looks like a perfectly normal person rather than a drug-addled degenerate. Then, of course, he starts to come down. From the look of him, he must have taken the drugs several hours ago, after which I imagine he did a long stretch of hard work, tired himself out, and went to sleep. And then an old friend came to visit. In theory, there's nothing strange about that. But why is he being so wary with me? We've always had a good relationship. I respected his remarkable talent, and he saw me as a friend. I don't understand what on earth's going on here.

"Did I come at a bad time? Sorry, I didn't want to bother you. I can come back another day."

"No, no. Take a seat. Do you want something to drink?"

As soon as he says this, he goes out of the room.

To get water? But there's a bottle under the desk. It's not like him to take the effort to offer a guest a separate glass. I don't have time to make sense of it all before my friend returns.

"Here," he holds out an unopened bottle of fizzy water.

Well, well, well! Where did that come from? I didn't see anything like it in the kitchen.

"Could I have a glass, too?"

"I'll be right back." Once again he leaves the room.

A few seconds later he returns and hands me a dirty glass. That's interesting – the glass he gives me is just as dirty as always, but the bottle of water is spotlessly clean and brand new. Somehow these two facts don't fit together. It makes no sense, but I open the bottle anyway and pour myself a glass. It's so long since I've drunk fizzy water. I'd quite forgotten how the bubbles sputter in the glass, and the pleasant way they tickle your tongue. Shit, it's like a whole lifetime has passed since the last time. I've been a

little too quick to get used to this weird existence. When was the last time I had a shower even? It doesn't bear thinking about.

"So, what do you want?"

I put the glass down.

"As I said, I want to buy some proper clothes, and a gun of some sort. You can see for yourself the shitstorm outside. On the way here I was so scared I almost cacked my pants five times!"

"Very well, we'll see if I can help. What have you got to trade?"

I dig around in my pockets and place all the junk in front of me. Then I separate the money – eight hundred rubles – and the syringe of morphine.

Mishka looks at it all indifferently.

"You haven't got much."

"What do you mean? It was hard enough to get all that."

He stands up, goes over to the window, and stands there for a while looking down at the street.

"The thing is, you're lying. You need something else from me."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But we've known each other for quite some time. I'm surely the last person you'd come to in this kind of situation. But here you are, and I don't believe you."

"Well, it's not your problem now!"

I turn around. Standing in the doorway are three strangers. They have dark hoods pulled so far over their heads that their faces are barely visible. Shotgun barrels glint in their hands, and one has an assault rifle on his back.

“Good morning!” I say, getting to my feet.

“Sit back down,” orders one of them without raising his voice, and the shotgun barrel in his hand points me clearly back into my place.

Well, it’s not like I can argue with that, is it? I lower myself back into my seat.

“Thanks, brother,” nods the man at the head of the group to Misha. “You did the right thing.”

He walks over to the desk, takes something out of the pocket, and hands it to my friend.

“Who did he used to be?”

“A system administrator in one of the divisions of the corporation.”

“Which one exactly?”

“Not sure. I do remember what he did, though – inventory management and fixed asset movements. I helped them to write a few programmes.”

“Alright, we’ll take care of him. You keep up the good work, brother.”

They lead me out of the flat, gathering up everything that I’d laid out on Mishka’s table on the way. They pat down my pockets unceremoniously and give me a kick to get moving. We head downstairs, step out of the door, and move off to one side. On the way, they shove some sort of bag over my head, so I’m completely unable to see anything. We don’t walk far. There’s a nasty scrape of metal, and I catch a waft of damp in my face.

“There’s a step in front of you. Don’t fall. Hold on to the wall.”

Following this advice, I stretch out both arms. My left arm comes into contact with cold metal. A pipe? No, a rail. I grip it and shift slightly closer to the wall. We descend the stairs. It’s a short flight, fifteen or twenty steps, and then our feet again hit a hard surface, our steps producing a deep echo.

It feels like we're walking through some type of underground tunnel. We continue some distance further, around a hundred paces. We turn, turn again, and then there's the scraping sound of another metal door. They pull the bag off my head and shove me in the back.

The room is poorly lit, with a single dim bulb hanging from the ceiling. It's a smallish space, furnished with a table behind which is sitting another guy in a hood. Is this some kind of uniform?

"Who are you?"

I hurriedly provide all the details I can – my name, address, and last place of employment.

"Are you still living in your flat?"

"Where else would I go? I thought they were going to evacuate us. My neighbour said we wouldn't have to wait for long."

"Why did you come here?"

"To see Mishka. He's an old friend, and I thought he could help me."

"Why did you think he could help?"

"He always had contacts outside the official legal channels. I thought maybe some of them would still be working. The shops are all shut, aren't they? I've got to get food from somewhere."

The guy runs his fingers through my things, which are laid out before him on the table. He picks up the syringe of morphine.

"Where did you get this from?"

"Well, some of my friends used to take it now and then. But I'm not a drug addict. I just thought I could sell it."

"You knew that your friend was an addict. You wanted to get some information from him. Who sent you?"

At this, I break out in a cold sweat. The guy is speaking without any emotion, like a wind-up automaton. He clearly doesn't believe what I'm saying, and he suspects I'm working for someone else.

"Who could have sent me here? I haven't left home all this time."

"What have you been eating?"

"We had a special project at work that went on for several days. When it was all over, we decided to have a party. One of my colleagues had all the food in his car, and was bringing it over to my place. I live on my own, so we normally use my flat for get-togethers. He helped me get the food inside, then went back out to his car. That's when the shooting started. His car went up in flames, and I ran back inside. We'd bought food for ten people, so there was plenty for me all this time."

The man thinks for a while. Then he raises his head and stares at me intently.

"They're already here."

"Who?"

He nods to the men who brought me in.

"This guy's an outsider. His former employment might be of interest to us. Go and put him in the basement. I'll have a think about how we can make use of him."

"Should we set him to work?"

"Obviously. He's not one of us, so there's no reason to spare him."

He sweeps all my things into a bag that's standing next to one leg of the table, then dismisses my guards with a nod.

Again a bag is pulled over my head, and again I'm being led along some corridor. I count my steps and try to remember the turns. I did spend quite a long time in logistics, and I now seize on to any information like this

as fast as I can. We don't go far before there's the scrape and rasp of metal again, the bag's pulled off and I'm shoved in the back. I take two steps forward and behind me the metal rasps nastily again.

So, here we are. Judging by the number of steps we took, it's about five hundred metres from here to the exit. What is more, I didn't notice anyone challenging us on the way, which means that there probably aren't any guard posts. All I need to do is get past this door.

"Who the fuck did those arseholes bring now? Another guest?"

I turn around.

"Who's there?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"My name's Denis. I used to be a system administrator. What about you?"

"A sysadmin, were you?" asks my unseen interrogator. "Well, I never. You do get all sorts here."

"Who are you?"

"Ivan Kolesnichenko's my name."

From his further explanations, it transpired that my cellmate, whose face I still couldn't see, had been a policeman in the traffic safety division. On the day when everything kicked off in the city, he had been working at a patrol post on the outskirts. According to him, what happened had not been an accident.

"We were already well prepared for something of the sort. There'd been two special training courses. There were new buses in the bus park. A lot of them, in fact. More than the city will ever need. Everybody knew we were getting ready for something, but nobody knew what. A friend of mine was a local beat cop, said they'd been sent round all the residential

buildings to throw together a plan for who should be evacuated and in what order."

"So you knew all about it?"

"I wouldn't say that... How can I explain? No, nobody *knew* anything, but a lot of us suspected something. You could feel the tension in your bones. This I can tell you: anybody working in the public sector and most of their families were evacuated on the first day. Moreover, from what I saw, it wasn't just the high-ranking professionals they took. It seemed more like they were trying to clear the whole city."

"What for?"

"Who the fuck knows? Nobody told us anything. I'm just glad I managed to get my family on one of the buses."

Ivan sighed, then went on talking. From what he said, it turned out that the powers that be had planned to evacuate the whole city over five days. That was why, in his opinion, rumours had been spread that some sort of catastrophe had occurred in Tarkov.

"Are you saying there wasn't one?"

"As far as I know, that's all bullshit. Think about it – if the shit had really hit the fan, absolutely everybody would have freaked out and been running round like their butts were on fire. But in fact, the work went on at exactly the same rate as on the first day. No one batted an eyelid. That doesn't follow."

As Ivan explained it, all the work to evacuate the population could have been completed on time. That's what everyone expected and was preparing for. He'd seen the plan of deployment for his own department with his own eyes. It certainly didn't look like the plan had been thrown together at the last minute. It was a properly drafted and printed official document. However, somebody somewhere had screwed everything up. First there was a big explosion somewhere in the centre of town, then evacuation buses had been attacked in several place simultaneously. The

unknown attackers had opened fire on the patrol cars escorting the buses, too. There had been casualties, although nobody had managed to work out exactly how many.

"Then there was some kind of flash – a blue flame across the sky, and all communications went to hell. Our mobile phones stopped working. Some of our radios burnt out, and from the ones that survived all we could hear was the groups closest to us. We did manage to find out that the troops approaching the city were met with mines and machine-gun fire. Then we all freaked out, too. The guys started to split up, some of them running off to their families, and the rest of us headed for the Transport Police headquarters. We were shot at on the way. Why and by whom, I do not know. I got hit in the leg. The lads dragged me into a basement and went to get help. Then these guys came along instead."

"Who are they, then? What are they up to?"

"Who the hell knows? They're all fucked in the head. They keep muttering the same things under their breath, but they won't talk to us. Apparently, we're of no interest to them."

"Do they say anything about this work? What do we have to do?"

"We're digging a tunnel. From what I've heard, they're doing the same thing elsewhere as well. But don't get your hopes up – the chances of you and me getting out of here are one in a million. They have no respect for human life whatsoever. They're not too concerned about their own, let alone ours."

"Is there anyone else in here?"

"Not in this cell, no. This is a holding cell where they bring the new ones. And the sinners like me."

"What did you do to end up here?" I ask him.

"I can't walk properly because of my leg. I stumbled while I was pulling a cart, and the guard smacked me in the shoulder with the butt of his

gun. I lost it and punched him in the face. So now I'm sitting here and waiting for my punishment. I know what to expect, and I'm just looking forward to it all being over."

"You said this was a holding cell. Are they going to take me somewhere else, then?"

"Down below, where else? That's where we're all headed, and that's where they'll bury us. They drag you off into a far corner and cover you with dirt. So, brace yourself."

Well, that's something to look forward to, isn't it? Fuck me, that's just what I need. Yet another Makar. There it was lugging round the "beam", and here it's dicking around with a shovel – yet more healthy exercise. Sorry, mate, that's not what I signed up for.

"So how do they take us down below?"

"The way you'd expect – along comes a guard, pulls a bag over your head, and off you go."

"And this guard, he's on his own, is he?"

"No, they bring along a whole regiment. What have they got to be afraid of? You? Or me with my one leg? Don't make me laugh!"

Well, I wasn't trying to cheer him up. I'd already put some thoughts together during our conversation. Beyond that, I was confident I could find my way back upstairs. Still, I wasn't planning to tell my new acquaintance all about quite yet. Just in case.

Trying to make as littles noise as possible, I undo my belt and carefully remove the plasters from my leg. Now I have in my hands a comparatively quiet gun with a full magazine. I can definitely hit someone standing in the doorway – it would be hard to miss. I mean, I have seen films where some rapper fires off a whole magazine at his enemy from two metres away and misses completely. But all the same I'm not a rapper, and their strange habit of aiming at their enemies with their pistols twisted to

one side has always seemed pretty dumb to me. I won't be trying any tricks like that, I'll just be shooting the normal way. So there's a pretty good chance I'll manage to hit my opponent with at least one bullet. I pull back the bolt and check the breech to make sure there's a bullet in there. Sure enough, there is. Right where it's meant to be, so the gun's ready to fire.

I don't know if my cellmate understood what I was up to, but I certainly didn't hear any complaints. He just shifted around a little in his corner, presumably trying to get more comfortable. I heard some sort of grinding noise. Could it be his teeth?

So, now we wait. That's getting to be a habit with me. An hour passes, or there abouts. Without a watch I can't say exactly how long.

Then somewhere at the very edge of perception I make out the shuffle of footsteps. Someone's coming along the corridor. I don't know if there's anything else down here except our cell, but I really, really hope not. Whatever the truth of it, the footsteps stop outside our door and the bolt is drawn back.

"Come on then, new boy. Off we go!"

A torch beam hits me in the face. It's blindingly bright and I'm forced to shade my eyes with the palm of my left hand. The guard chuckles and turns his torch for a second on to my cellmate, who turns out to be a skinny man with a shaggy black beard. He's already standing up, leaning a hand on the wall to steady himself.

"You can sit back down. It's not your time yet. We'll be taking you for a walk this evening."

Taking advantage of the fact the guard doesn't have his torch on me, I bring the pistol out from behind my back. Holding the stock with both hands, I train my gun on him. His silhouette is pretty easy to make out. As well as the weak light from the corridor, the reflection of the torch beam off the walls illuminates the tunnel-dweller reasonably well. My pistol cracks quickly, the bolt shoots back, and the empty shell case clatters off the wall behind my back.

“Ahh...” gasps the guard.

He bends double, grasping his stomach. I squeeze the trigger again, and this time he says nothing, just drops in a heap on the floor. I jump over to him and pick up his torch from the floor. In its beam I see a skinny man in some sort of dark robe. The butt of his gun is sticking out from beneath his body. Judging by the shape of it, that’s not a hunting gun.

“Are you coming with me or what?” I say, turning to my cellmate.

In the torch beam, I see him drop a piece of brick onto the floor. So, that’s what he was scraping away at – he was breaking a brick out of the wall, would you believe it? He’s a stubborn sod, I’ll give him that.

“Fuck, no. I’m going to hang around here and wait for the second coming,” laughs the former policeman.

“In which case, grab his gun. I’m no greater marksman, I’m afraid.”

He bends down and pulls an assault rifle out from underneath the guard, then goes through the dead guy’s pockets and finds a spare magazine.

“Let’s go. You take the lead, I’m no great walker.”

I laugh. We make quite the pair – one of us can hardly walk, and the other can hardly shoot. I hope he can at least use a gun better than he can get around.

The corridor seems endless. Strange, when we were coming down here I didn’t notice any great distance. Or is it because I’m more nervous now? I have just shot a guy. I pulled the trigger absolutely calmly, knowing full well what the consequences would be, and I didn’t feel the slightest twinge inside. Absolutely nothing at all! Just as if all I’d done was squash a mosquito. An avatar, nothing more. I just can’t accept that they’re real, living people. Sure, they walk, talk, and shoot guns, but they’re still just characters in a game. And that’s why I don’t feel the slightest remorse whatsoever.

We turn a corner, then turn another. A door appears in the torch beam. If memory doesn't deceive me, this was precisely the room I was questioned in. I halt and explain this to my companion as quickly as possible. He nods silently – he understands. I switch the torch to my left hand, and grip my pistol in my right. Who knows what's waiting behind the door, so it's best to be prepared. Walking out of here and leaving the room unchecked when there could be an armed enemy sitting in there would be extremely stupid.

I push the door. It's locked. A question is shouted from inside. I mutter something under my breath, trying to make the words reasonably loud but still incomprehensible. From behind the door, I hear the sound of footsteps and the bolt sliding back. The door swings open, and I pull the trigger almost immediately. There's the crack again, and another body in a robe crumples at my feet. I push the door hard and stumble inside.

Sitting behind the table is the same man who questioned me. There's a piece of bread in his right hand, while his left hand is reaching towards a mug standing at the end of the table. I don't have time to say or do anything before a shove from behind slams me against the wall. My companion barges past me. A single blow sends my interrogator flying into the wall. The policeman bends over him and smacks him again with his gun butt. And again, and again. Then he slumps to the side and sits down on the floor.

"Well, now I can die happy!"

"What are you so pleased about?"

"That arsehole," he nods to the body lying next to the wall, "is the leader. I don't mean their top boss, who I've never actually seen. But this guy's the one who actually decided the fate of all the prisoners down here. He's the one who sentenced me to death, the bastard! As you heard, they were planning to off me this evening. Good luck with that! I swore to myself right there that I would spit on his grave. Well, I've no idea where his grave's going to be, but I can spit on him right here."

Which is exactly what he does.

“Maybe you’d like to wait a bit before you die, then? It’s not far to the exit from here, only about a hundred metres. After that we’re back in the city and everything’ll be a little easier.”

Ivan considers this for a second.

“Well, I can keep going for a bit longer. If it’s really only a hundred metres or so...

While he’s gathering his strength, I search the guy I killed. I find a pistol on him like the once I collected next to my old house – police issue. Overcoming my squeamishness, I also go through the interrogator’s pockets. Surprisingly, I don’t find anything useful in them, only a small knife with a wooden handle hanging off his belt. Ah, well. When the fish won’t bite, you can always catch crabs. I hang it on my own belt, and also grab the bag that’s standing by the table. That was where he put my property. I don’t have time to rummage around for it now, so I take the whole thing. I pull the magazine out of the pistol I’ve just picked up, slide a few bullets out of it, and use them to refill mine. The bullets are the same calibre, so I hope there won’t be any problems. I have managed to get used to this pistol more or less. Plus, it shoots quietly, and in these underground tunnels every sound echoes.

We manage the rest of the way to the front door without incident. It turns out not even to be locked. One push, the hinges groan, and we’re back outside. Is that it? Either way, we need to get out of here as fast as possible. I look around and see a familiar building – that’s Mishka’s house.

“I need to pop in there,” I nod towards the building. “I left some things behind.”

Ivan says nothing for a few seconds.

“Alright. I don’t give a shit as long as we get away from here,” he says. “That way’s no worse than any other. Just don’t go running off – walking’s not easy for me.”

He didn’t have to say anything about that. I haven’t gone quite crazy enough yet to go running around the streets in broad daylight. We manage to reach the building without any real problems, although we did have to slip into a ditch of some sort to let two guys go past. Who they were and where they were going was of absolutely no interest to either of us. They walked past, and that was enough for us. Now we reach the familiar building and Mishka’s staircase. I turn to the policeman.

“The stairs here are covered in all sorts of junk. You need to step carefully. Upstairs there’s a guy who’s already ratted me out once to those arseholes. I don’t know how he called them, but they weren’t inside the building. They’re hiding out somewhere nearby. I don’t see any point in the both of us going up.”

“That makes sense,” Ivan agrees. “I’ll find some cover nearby, and if I see any bastard coming this way...”

He chuckles, and I don’t envy anyone who tries to get inside.

Once again, I’m climbing the stairs. I don’t take off my boots this time, but I take care to choose where I put my feet nonetheless. I don’t want to make a sound. Up one floor, then another, and there’s a familiar door. Under a pile of junk, I find my shotgun and my waistcoat. My backpack’s lying behind the couch, too. But I can actually pick it up later, and I don’t really need the bag of looted stuff right now, so I leave it there. I’m better off working light for now. I push the door to Mishka’s flat with my shoulder. I take a quick look to the right – the kitchen’s empty. I take two steps to the side, and see my old friend in the sights of my shotgun, sitting at his desk. His laptop is open in front of him, so I guess he’s working.

“You weren’t expecting me back, were you?”

He slowly raises his head.

“You?”

“No, the ghost of Hamlet’s fucking father.”

“How? Did they let you go?”

“You know, I somehow forgot to ask their permission.”

I shift slightly to the side, to make sure I can’t be seen from the front door. As I move, my waistcoat swings open, and I notice how Mishka’s eyes widen. What’s that about? Ah, it’s because he’s seen the knife hanging on my belt!

“You recognize that? I had a chat with its former owner.”

“He... What’s happened to him?”

“He died suddenly. You know, when you get the butt of a gun in your face it doesn’t do much good for your health, not to mention your longevity.”

Mishka’s face twists up suddenly. I can’t even work out what’s making him grimace like that – pain, confusion, or something else.

“Did you kill him?”

“What do you think? Did you think you could rat me out to those guys and everything would be super-duper? I hate to disappoint you, but you were sorely mistaken. You can’t afford to sell out all your friends. Move over there.”

I use the barrel of my gun to point clearly to the corner of the room. My former friend stands up and retreats until his back comes up against the wall. I go over to his desk and, keeping the gun on him, I shut the laptop with my left hand. I place the peculiar attachments that are connected to it on top.

“How did you call those bastards?”

“You just have to twitch the curtains in the flat next door. They’re close by and they come immediately.”

“Well then, you can try to betray me again. But I warn you now it’ll be your last chance, and I recommend you take my warning seriously. It’s not as easy as all that to scare the Predator.”

“The Predator? Who’s that?”

“What did you think? That I just came to see you for the fun of it, because I had nothing better to do? And that I was the one who killed the bastard in the tunnel? It’s fishing with live bait, old boy. You were made, and it happened a long time ago. Turn to the window and count to a hundred. Out loud. And if you miss a single number, then god help you!”

I grab the laptop from the table and make my way backwards out of the flat. I slip quickly next door and shove the computer into my half empty backpack. I’m going to look a bit strange carrying the backpack and the new bag of loot at the same time, but I don’t have time now to sort them out. The new bag also has straps, and I fasten it roughly to the backpack. No longer trying to sneak around, I run down the stairs. As I turn from the first-floor landing, I hear a burst of gunfire below. Then another, and another.

So, Mishka didn’t bother counting to a hundred.

Holding my gun at the ready, I glance out onto the street. I see Ivan sitting on the ground and expertly searching a dead boy. See, that’s what police training does for you. A little distance from him, I see two more dead. From the look of it, all three of them jumped out at the distress signal, and all three of them went down.

“Need any help?”

“No, they’re all cold,” answers Ivan calmly. “Take a look at the one further over there. He might still be twitching.”

I move closer. No, there’s nothing to deal with here. The amount of blood beneath this guy’s body is enough to know he won’t be taking any meaningful action ever again.

“Looks like he’s done.”

“Then go through his pockets.”

That’s a sensible suggestion. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible. That’s exactly why I’m not heading back upstairs to seek out my former friend. For some reason, I suspect that his new friends will find him soon enough, and they’ll have some very awkward questions for him. I’d give a great deal to see how he manages to worm himself out of that one.

Having rapidly searched the pockets of these unwelcome “rescuers”, we take a good look around, cross the street, and take cover between buildings. We then climb to the first floor of some two-storey building that, by the look of it, used to be a kindergarten. Here we can finally relax a little and get ourselves together. From the recently departed trio, we have inherited two shotguns – one pump-action and one double-barrel – and an assault rifle. There were about thirty rounds of all kinds of ammo for the shotguns – birdshot, buckshot, and slugs. For the assault rifle there was only one magazine, and unfortunately the ammo wasn’t the same as for the gun we’d taken from the guard in the tunnel. The tunnel-dweller’s rifle was 7.62 mm calibre, while his overground colleague had a 5.45 mm gun. After some consideration, Ivan chooses to keep the gun he has.

“It’s older, but it’s a lot more powerful. Plus, when necessary I can give someone a good smack with the butt. This one’s got a fold-up stock, and it’s not fixed on properly. Look, it won’t even fold up properly. Not to mention that it’s only got one magazine.”

After a moment’s thought, I give him the looted pistol. The one I took off the interrogator’s guard in the tunnel. True, it doesn’t have a full magazine, but it’s still better than nothing. We share out the rest of the stuff we took from the “rescuers” in a similarly friendly manner. Taking a look at my companions, I suggest that we eat something. I still have some food in my backpack.

“Good idea,” he nods, “but first I need a nap. I don’t feel too good.”

He goes to the end of the room, where there's a pile of rags next to the wall. He stretches himself out on them, then slides back the bolt of his pistol and tucks it under his arm. See, that's what a pro does – thinks about protecting himself first and foremost. I'll take note of that useful demonstration.

I drag my backpack and my kit bag in front of me, and begin by pulling out a tin of meat and two packs of hardtack. That should be enough for a quick snack. Rummaging in my backpack, I add a bottle of mineral water. You can't go wrong with that. That reminds me, I need to go through the interrogator's bag. It's fairly heavy, so there could be some useful stuff in there.

I move over to the windowsill and begin laying out the contents on it. While I'm at it, I take a look outside, just in case. Although Ivan did explain that any pursuers will start by trying to block all escape routes, which means that they'll be headed quite a long way from the site of our recent fight. Nobody's going to look right under their own nose, as it defies all logic. I won't argue, as I'm sure he knows what he's doing. Long years of police service must mean something. I've found myself a resourceful and competent companion, and I've no complaints.

So, there's my syringe of morphine, my cigarettes, my matches, and my lighters – everything I was planning to trade with the shopkeeper's rival. All that goes back in my backpack. It's mine, and I don't intend to share it.

A box of pistol ammo. My initial excitement gives way to disappointment when I open it, and I push the box to one side. The shells in my gun don't look anything like that. They seem to be about the same calibre, but I doubt very much they'll fit. I pull a bullet out of my pistol for comparison. Sadly, this box won't be any use to me as ammo. Still, it's a good thing to trade. Regretfully, I put it to one side.

The next box cheers me up, however. The bullets in it look very much the same as mine, although the tips are painted a blue colour for some reason. That must mean something. Anyway, they fit my pistol, and so I put them straight in my backpack.

Next to see daylight is a whole smoked sausage, which is very much what I'm looking for. There's also a tin of fish and a pack of bread snacks. Nothing to write home about, but that's another little meal right there.

A few packages of field dressing, which I manage to identify from the labels on them. A plastic bottle of chlorhexidine, which is also useful, particularly in the present situation. I'll have to have a go at Ivan's leg with this stuff. I've seen how it's done in the past, so I can probably make a fair attempt at dressing his wound. In all probability, it's something he himself knows how to do, for that matter.

Pulling on a chain, I draw from the bag a whole string of memory-stick keys. Well, well, well. That interrogator was a bit of a dark horse. How many people did he manage to rip off? Or did he, like me, take them from the dead? No, I'm not going to share these with anyone, either. Particularly not now I have Mishka's laptop, and thus the chance to try checking what's on the memory sticks. Of course, there was nothing to stop the former owners using them to store their porn collections, and my work may well all be a waste of time. Still, that's no reason not to have a go.

Left in the bag was a good, powerful torch and a plastic case with spare batteries, plus some exercise books and notepads – what the hell were they for? Still they could come in useful. I might light a bonfire with them.

Having finished my appraisal of the loot, I make a separate pile for my companion's share, and go over to wake him up.

He wasn't sleeping peacefully. I only had to tap him on the shoulder for him to twitch and reach for his pistol.

"Whoah! It's OK, it's OK! It's me, Denis."

He turns looks me over groggily. Then apparently the pieces fall together in the right place in his head, and he drops the hand that's holding the gun.

"Shit, sorry. I didn't recognize you."

“That’s alright, come and eat.”

Once he’s sat down at the table, I push the pile of loot over to him.

“That’s yours.”

The former policeman isn’t at all bothered by this attitude to property. He keeps on chewing while shoving his share of the stuff into his pockets. Come to think of it, it’s amazing how much people are affected by their situation. It’s only a few hours since we broke out of our underground prison, but Ivan’s already a different man. True, his unshaven mug looks no prettier, but he’s standing taller, believe it or not. His voice sounds more confident and has lost its notes of desperation. And the former traffic cop’s movements are sharp and collected. He even wears the ripped canvas jacket I found him in as if it had a major’s chevrons on the sleeves at the very least. As for the guns... When he’s holding a gun, it’s like he’s speaking louder.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. We got out of there together. Once you’re done eating, change the dressing on your leg. There’s antiseptic to clean the wound, and bandages. Should make a big difference.”

The policeman nods.

“Again, thank you.”

“What are you planning to do next?”

“I’ll try to make it as far as headquarters. The lads had a reason to go there, which means they must have had a plan.”

Well, it’s an idea that’s no worse than any other. I haven’t had much luck finding the shopkeeper’s rival so far, and going to see Mishka again is tantamount to suicide, so I might as well go with Ivan. It’s easier to get around when there’s two of you, and he’s a far better shot than I am.

Still, we didn't go anywhere that day. About fifty metres from our hideout, a gunfight broke out. Who was fighting who and what they were fighting for remained a mystery, but we decided not to go outside and look. We crawled further into the building and found a staircase down into the basement. By the light of the torch, we took a look at my companion's leg. I'm far from being a specialist, and I can't say how bad it is, but Ivan came back to life a little after we'd redressed it. We ate again before going to sleep, and he was even quite chatty. Remembering the inventive bandit, I searched around on the ground floor, found the canteen, and borrowed from there a fair quantity of noisy objects – forks, spoons, and other such junk. Elsewhere, I found thread in a cupboard, and I spent quite some time wandering round the building, fixing up all sorts of early-warning alarms with the kit I'd found. If anyone came into the building from any direction, they were bound to set off one or two of my tripwires, and the resultant noise would wake the dead. That's because it won't just fall onto the floor, but into a carefully place bowl or saucepan.

Examining my work, the policeman chuckles.

"And you say you were a system administrator?"

"That's right."

"I'd like to see what sort of systems you were looking after."

Whether it was my inventions or dumb luck I don't know, but we slept well. Nobody broke into our hideout and the wild gunfire didn't interrupt our dreams.

* * *

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know, Brother Fyodor. We covered all the escape routes, but they never appeared. Our brothers are still out on the streets, but they

haven’t found any outsiders. We’ve swept the whole area, but found nothing.”

“How do you stay so calm when you tell me this? What did the programmer say?”

“He’s terrified. It’s hard to understand what he’s on about.”

“Still, what did he say?”

“He said something about some Predator or other. Someone who comes at night and kills in the dark.”

“Is he high?”

“It doesn’t look like it. Maybe he’s confused, or it’s some flashbacks from his past life. He does hallucinate sometimes. He’s been on drugs for a very long time.”

“I don’t have time for his hallucinations or his health. Leave him be, he’s of no use to us now. How is it possible that someone got into the tunnel, killed Brother Mikhail and his guard, and took everything they had in the room? How did they manage to go on inside, kill another of our comrades, and take the two prisoners? Why did nobody see them? Why was there no guard at the entrance?”

“They were changing shifts, so there was nobody on duty for a few minutes.”

“And that was enough time for whoever to do everything that I just said? Did they fly through the air? No? Nobody can move that fast!”

“We’re searching every building in the neighbourhood.”

“What’s the point? They’re gone. Do you really not understand? Coincidences like that just don’t happen. Somebody turns up at the programmer’s, lets himself be captured and led into the tunnel. Then the men who are following him use their heads, stay hidden, and follow the whole group to the entrance. They wait for the guard to change, go inside,

do their black business, come back out, and take the equipment form the programmer. Then they kill three more of our brothers and vanish without trace. How many people does all that take? And who on earth are they?"

"I have no answer, Brother Fyodor."

"That's a great shame. Our whole operation is at risk. Nobody can know when the next blue flame will come!"

Chapter 8

Crouching at the corner of the building, Ivan examines the street carefully. Having left the kindergarten behind, we've already covered about one and a half kilometres. We could have taken a shorter route, but we sensibly decided to avoid open spaces, so we were moving from cover to cover. That's why, instead of a forty-minute walk, it's taken us about four hours. However, now we're sitting at the corner of some kind of warehouse while my companion takes a look at the headquarters of the Tarkov General Administration for Traffic Safety.

"Who the hell knows? It seems to be quiet."

"So, what are we waiting for? Let's go."

"It's the quiet that's bothering me. By my estimate, there should be thirty to forty people in there, and several cars. So why the hell are they sitting in silence? It doesn't make sense." Ivan shakes his head.

I'm not arguing. He should know his co-workers if anyone does. What are we going to do, then?

Since we redressed his wound, the policeman's been walking a little faster. Apparently, his leg's not as painful as it was. Still, he's in no state to race across the open ground and run up to the building. That's why he's looking at me questioningly. To tell the truth, we could just part ways right here. I've already delivered on my offer to escort him where he wanted, and I've no interest whatsoever in getting to know his colleagues. It's all too easy to imagine how our meeting would end up. I'd be disarmed, there's no question about it. Nobody's going to give my credentials as a fighter a second glance, so the best that I could hope for is that they'd offer me some tedious domestic duties, and how is that really better than being a slave to

some gang or other? Sure, they probably wouldn't beat me, but even that's not guaranteed. They wouldn't threaten me with sudden death, and they'd probably even feed me. But I wouldn't be first in line. I consider the possibilities and grow increasingly convinced that I've no desire whatsoever to be put back in a pen. On the other hand, it's not like I can just abandon my companion right here.

"OK, I'll try to run over to the building. But you keep a lookout, alright? I can't shoot while I'm running."

In all honesty, my accuracy is nothing to crow about when I'm standing still either, or in any position for that matter. That's why I'm carrying a shotgun, because there's no need to worry about a few centimetres one way or the other. Shot has a good spread, and at least some of it's bound to hit your enemy, even if it just clips them. Still, why should I tell all and sundry about that? It's possible that my companion has gained the impression that I'm a perfectly experienced but very modest marksman. If so, there's no reason to disabuse him.

I take off my beloved backpack, which is packed to bursting, and place it next to the wall. I do the same with the almost empty loot bag. The assault rifle that I got when we split up our spoils I lay next to Ivan. There's only one magazine of bullets for it, I'm a terrible shot, and he's much more capable with it. I check the pistol in my pocket, take the safety off my shotgun, and set off for the front doors.

What did my companion teach me? Run from cover to cover, take a good look round, and always remember that you can change direction if you need to. So now I search out a suitable hide to dash for.

I take a quick glance sideways at Ivan. He nods to show he's ready.

The ground slams against the soles of my boots. I run wildly, clutching my shotgun to my chest. At the same time, I attempt to jink from side to side like a hare, trying not to move in a straight line. To a bystander no doubt it looks absurd. So what? It's worth looking absurd as long as I stay alive.

My first cover is a coil of cable lying on its side. From what my companion was saying, getting a bullet through that thing is impossible even in theory. So now I dive behind the coil. I crawl along on my stomach about thirty centimetres forward, and now I'm fully protected by several layers of tightly wrapped cable.

Silence. Nobody's bawling about my presence or shooting in my direction. Did they not see me, or is there no one to shout?

I take a breather and plan the direction of my next dash. About ten metres further on there's a ditch that was probably dug to put this very cable in. That's what I'm planning to dive into. One, two, three – let's go!

Another crazy run, which ends in a no less crazy leap. Why? Because at the bottom of the ditch there's a pile of equipment that's been thrown in there any old how, and which was completely invisible from my previous position. I land reasonably accurately between two of those piles of metal. Not completely safely, as a tool cracks me painfully in the shoulder, and another leaves a scratch on my cheek. It's not a pleasant experience, but at least I didn't land arse-first on anything. For no particular reason, I recall the man speared on the fence pole, and I shiver at the memory.

So, what next? Should I crawl along this ditch as I originally planned? Well, if I can get round all this equipment, then it's worth a go. I raise my head and check out the different options for moving on. Let's have a go. Squeezing between the piles of metal, I tear my hand and give my knee a painful bash, but I do eventually get through.

At the very last moment, just before I start to crawl on, I suddenly notice silhouetted against the sky thin metal wires running from some of the equipment. They head upwards and then vanish somewhere behind the fence. Interesting, what the hell is that? They don't look much like tripwires. Who would bother to extend them that far? A grenade doesn't go off straight away, but even if I was walking at a normal pace and not crawling on my belly, the explosion would happen long before I managed to reach the fence.

My discovery has little effect on the speed of my progress. After moving along for another fifteen metres, I crawl through a hole dug under the fence. It's a regular fence, made from end-on-end reinforced concrete panels fixed into the ground. They're tall enough to make it impossible to see what's going on inside the grounds, and it would take some time to knock through them even with a run-up.

Raising my head slightly, I quickly come to realize that there'd be nothing to see here anyway. The reason's simple – I've caught an all too familiar smell. To be precise, the smell of dead bodies, several of them by the strength of it. I can't imagine what sort of garrison would not bother to dispose of their dead on their own territory. To tell the truth, I could just turn round and head back right now. There's almost certainly no one left alive in the building. Still, I went through all that effort to get here...

I get up on my knees and stick my head out of the ditch. Straight in front of me is an ordinary police car – the usual paint job, lights on the roof, everything you'd expect. The only thing that ruins the overall picture is the smashed glass and the bullet holes in the doors. It would appear that this is where the smell is coming from.

Gripping my shotgun, I climb out of the trench and run quickly to the wall of the building. The wall covers me on one side, and the shot-up car on the other. From this position, I can take a more careful look at the car. In the front seat, there's a corpse in police uniform. Even from here I can see his pockets have been turned out. Another dead body hangs out of the window of the back left door. I feel sorry for the guys. Judging by the bullet holes, they were fired on from the direction of the building while the car was still in motion. What's this ahead of me?

A garage, there's no way a building that looks like that could be anything else. I see wide-open doors and barrels of some sort that have rolled all over the place. I listen again, but everything's quiet. No footsteps, no voices, nothing. From what my companion told me, I remember that it's wise to always check the boots of those cars, as there might be something useful inside. To do that, however, I would have to move away from the wall and turn my back on the building, which I really don't want to do right

now. Never mind, I'll look for useful stuff later. The car's not going anywhere. First I need to take a peek inside the building.

Obviously, I'm not planning to walk straight through the front doors. Looking around, I see a broken window, and from there it's all simple. Choosing the barrel that's rolled closest to the wall, I move it carefully and with as little noise as possible to the window. Fortunately, I only have to carry it, or rather tilt and roll it, a few metres. I stand the barrel upright almost flat up against the wall, climb onto it, stretch out my arms, and scramble over the window ledge. First, I have to knock out some of the shards of glass, trying to make sure they fall on the ground. That way the sound of them dropping isn't too loud. Even so, some little pieces remained, and they scraped nastily across my waistcoat. Never mind, the main thing is I wasn't cut.

I look around. I'm in a small room. Judging by the shelves and cupboards, it's some kind of closet. That's confirmed when I see mops and brooms in the corner. The door's not locked, and opens quite easily. I glance down the corridor. It's empty and there's no one around.

I have only the vaguest idea about the layout of the building. I have, of course, had to pay the police a visit before. There's normally an officer on duty at the entrance. You can't get past them as there's always a second set of doors, either solid metal or a grille. If the duty officer doesn't open them, then there's really no easy way in, as you're facing thick bars that it's pretty difficult to break.

Where should I go, left or right? There's no obvious difference, so I go right. I have to say that here fate smiles on me almost immediately. Turning a corner, I find myself right by the duty officer's post, or at least at the end of the corridor that leads to it. The door at this end is wide open, and I can see the expected metal grille.

Holding my shotgun at the ready, I peek around the door. It looks like there's nobody here to make a noise. On the floor are several bodies close together, both in uniform and in civvies. Judging by the bullet marks on the walls, the smashed glass, and the crumbled plaster, there was quite a fight here. There's a huge number of empty shell cases on the floor, but I don't

see any guns. The pockets of all the dead bodies have been turned out, and two of the policemen are lying in nothing but their shirts. The entrance door is also wide open, but the smell is something else. The stench of death fills the whole space – the bodies have been here for a while.

Trying not to disturb a single corpse, I make for the door. Shell casings crunch under my feet. Stepping inside, I head towards the room where the duty officer would have been sitting. According to Ivan, this is where they normally keep all the weapons and armour. I can see that they did. Standing in the doorway, I look at the wide-open doors of the safes and metal cupboards. I doubt there's anything to look for here anymore. The place has been stripped bare. After a fleeting glance at the shot-up telephone switchboard, I head for the stairs to the first floor.

Everywhere the doors are wide open, cupboards smashed in, and drawers tipped out. Thankfully, I find fewer dead bodies upstairs. Four altogether, and only one in police uniform. The other three were in civilian clothes.

When I get to the top of the building, I take a seat on a step. I need to rest for a few minutes. I don't think I've ever seen so many dead bodies in one place. No, that's a lie. There were probably just as many in my old house. But there wasn't this smell there, except in the flat where I was hiding. Here it's everywhere, soaked into the walls.

There's no one alive here, that's absolutely obvious. As is the fact the building was systematically searched from top to bottom. They took everything that might be of any interest. They even turned out their own comrades' pockets, assuming that's who the men in civvies are. It's a spectacle that'll haunt my dreams for a long time.

More calmly now, not jumping at every sound, I head downstairs. On the way, I take a small crowbar from one of the offices. I noticed it straight away. Clearly, I'm not planning to take it with me. I've got a much better one in my rucksack. However, I need the crowbar here and now, and I've no real desire to run back to my kit to get a tool. I could of course get into the boot of the car through the cabin. All you have to do is take out the back seat. I remember helping a friend do the same thing when he broke the lock

on his boot. Here, however, there's a corpse on the backseat, and I really don't want to spend much time in a confined space right next to it. It's easier just to break the lock on the boot. It's not like that car's ever going anywhere again.

Turns out my companion was right! After a few minutes' work, I manage to bend the metal of the boot lid enough to take a look inside. I see metal glinting in the light of day. I continue to wield the crowbar and bend the car panel mercilessly. Eventually, something clicks and the mangled boot lid rises up. Inside there's an assault rifle. Not as big as the ones we have, with a short barrel and a folding stock. Underneath it is a heavy waistcoat. That would appear to be a bulletproof vest. I've seen the police wearing them. If that's here, then there should also be a helmet somewhere, but try as I might I can't find it. Ah, well, we'll have to be content with what we've got.

The bulletproof vest turns out to be horribly uncomfortable and extremely heavy. How they manage to walk around with them for hours on end I've no idea. I manage to put it on somehow, and promise to get the weight off me as soon as I get back to Ivan. He's used to this sort of gear, so let him carry it. The gun I'll keep, on the other hand. It's not as big as the one I have, but the bullets are exactly the same. The less you carry, the further you go.

My companion must have been on tenterhooks. When I appear in the doorway, he jumps out to meet me.

"So, what's going on over there?"

"It's a fucking mess. The building's full of corpses. There's a Lada 110 in the yard that you could thread spaghetti through. It's got two corpses in it. I found all this in the boot, just like you said."

"Did you get the number."

"Errr... 1148, I think."

“That’s Petrovich, head of our platoon. That was his car. Did you see the epaulets on the dead men?”

“Listen, that was more than I could manage. You wouldn’t believe the smell in there. If you want, go and take a look yourself. There’s no one there to shoot at you. The buildings been turned inside out, and I’d say they even took the light bulbs. All that’s left inside is a dozen or so corpses.”

Ivan sits down right there on the floor.

“Fuck... My boys, my poor boys... Where am I going to go now? What am I going to do?”

“I can’t help you there. How many of you were there altogether?”

He thinks for a while, then raises his head.

“You’re right, aren’t you? There’s more than two dozen just of our lot. Plus, several cars, and you only saw one. Petrovich left first, he was called in on the radio. After that strange flash some of the cars suddenly stopped working. Only the ones where the engines weren’t running when it happened were able to start, and only then on the tenth try. That was when he left. On his own with his driver. He didn’t wait for anyone. You say they’re both in the car, right?”

“Yes. They didn’t even have time to get out.”

“That means the headquarters was captured before that. I mean, before our lot came here. If their cars aren’t in the yard, that means they never drove in there.”

He gets to his feet and starts to pace in circles around the room. Then he stops and turns to me.

“Listen, there’s one more possibility, really close to here. A kilometre and a half. Let’s go there, OK?”

I don’t even have time to answer anything before a rasping sound comes from the direction of the headquarters. Ivan jumps to the window

and grabs his assault rifle. I run quickly over to my stuff and pull on my backpack and the looted bag. Ivan told me that this type of kitbag's called a haversack. I grab the assault rifle I found in the car and head back into the room. My companion stands pressed against the wall, carefully peeking out of the window. He's already put on the bulletproof vest I collected and tightened all the straps. When did he manage that? Basically, he's a man of action and he knows a lot, so it shouldn't come as any surprise.

"Someone's moving around over there. I just saw people."

"Maybe your guys have come back?"

"No, the uniform's not ours. By which I mean not Russian. Nor the guns, either."

Without going near the window, I try to make out what's going on. All I see is a gleam in a window on the top floor.

"Who's that climbing around upstairs?"

"Where?"

"There, in the corner window on the right." I stretch out my hand to show him.

Something suddenly slams into the floor and with a nasty whistle flies off into the corner. I don't even have time to feel afraid. Swearing loudly, Ivan raises his assault rifle and fires several short bursts. I meanwhile stand like an idiot in the middle of the room. What was that?

"Prat! Someone just shot at you!" comments the voice in my head with its customary snark. Only then do I dash for the corner. Just in time.

This time some kind of ribbon of fire flies off the floor and slams into the wall. It doesn't stop there either. It ricochets again and flies out of the window.

"The door! Hold the door!"

Why do I need to hold it?

“They’re coming from the street!”

Is someone coming to see us? Judging by what’s flying through the window, these guys aren’t popping in for tea. I bring up my shotgun and move towards the door. I’ve only taken a few steps before it becomes covered in some kind of bubbles and splinters fly out of it. Shit, those are bullets! They’re shooting at it! If I’d run any closer, that would have been it for me.

Well, if our unseen guests are quite happy to pound the absolutely innocent door with their assault rifles, there’s nothing to stop me from having a go at it, too. Just to let them know there’s no need to rush in, it might be dangerous. I don’t have much choice of weapon – my assault rifle’s on my back, and my pistol’s in its pocket. My shotgun, however, is right here in my hands. I bring it up, point it right at the centre of the door, and squeeze the trigger. Right at that moment the door opens and a dark shadow appears in the doorway. My finger continues to pull the trigger. Turns out the sound of a large-calibre gun is a lot louder than the rattle of an assault rifle, especially in an enclosed space. Your ears can really feel the difference.

As always, my first two rounds are buckshot. Actually, at this range it doesn’t make much difference. The doorway suddenly becomes empty, but only for a moment. The next second a new shadow appears there. My shotgun is semi-automatic, so I don’t need to pull the forestock to chamber a new round. The next portion of lead goes flying towards the door with exactly the same result – the unfortunate visitor is sent flying back outside. Then there’s a bang, and clouds of white smoke start to drift around the room.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

Fine with me, it’s about time we were leaving.

How we managed to escape the patrol, I have no idea. I’ve probably got my companion to thank for that. It was like he was a different man

during the fighting. He even forgot about his wounded leg. He pushed me, pulled me, kicked me to get me running. I was shooting, too, mostly from my shotgun. When the shells finished there was no time to reload it, so I fired off a few bursts from my assault rifle. I wasn't expecting it to wriggle and jump so much in my hands. I doubt very much that I hit anyone, but I might at least have given them a fright.

Now we're sitting in a basement somewhere. Ivan is exhausted. He's flopped down straight on the floor by the wall, and switched off completely. Choosing a spot opposite the entrance, I slide down onto the cold concrete. I rummage in my pockets, pull out shells, and begin mechanically reloading my shotgun. I too am very tired. If enemy boots come tramping through that doorway right now, I doubt very much I'll have the strength to get back on my feet. Very well, I'll just shoot straight at the door.

* * *

"What do you mean that you don't know who you were fighting? Couldn't you see who they were? Their uniforms? Their weapons? The number of them, even?"

"A small group, sir. No more than three or four men. Kramer spotted one of them in his sights and then fired on them, apparently. They returned automatic fire, injuring him and damaging his rifle. At the same time, the patrol approached the building, broke down the door, and attempted to enter the premises. They were met by an ambush. Judging by the weapons used, they were Scavs. They were firing shotguns at close range, almost point-blank. One of our boys was killed on the spot, and another seriously injured. We deployed smoke grenades, and used their cover to enter the building, but it was already empty. The enemy withdrew, continuing to return fire, and disappeared somewhere inside a residential building. It's like a maze in there, sir!"

"Are you telling me that the patrol had no results at all?"

“Unless you count our two casualties. They had one extremely skilled marksman with an automatic weapon. Our light armour’s no match for 7.62 mm rounds. I formed the impression that we were drawn into the ambush on purpose. There was firing from all sides – birdshot, buckshot, and assault rifle. I judged it possible that the enemy was only pretending to retreat in order to draw us further into an unknown area. In the circumstances, I was not able to continue our pursuit.”

“That’s sad, Jimmy. Very sad. We’re suffering utterly unjustified losses.”

Chapter 9

I guess I fell asleep. Or lost consciousness. I don't remember. Ivan brought me to my senses. He knelt down next to me and poked me in the ribs.

"You're not worried about catching radiculitis, then?"

"What?"

"It's a type of disease that makes your back hurt. They say you catch it from leaning against cold stones."

I give a bitter laugh.

"I'll be happy if I live that long."

"You're right there. You've always got a chance of dying young and healthy."

"You, too."

My companion unexpectedly smiles.

"Not fucking likely! First of all, I'm not exactly young anymore, and I'm certainly not healthy." He nods at his leg.

"How's your leg, by the way?"

"Believe it or not, while we were running around yesterday I forgot all about it. But today the bastard's stinging to try the patience of a saint."

“Well, let’s redress it. I’ve still got another dressing and the chlorhexidine.”

“You should have got the first-aid kit out of the car. It’s always right there in the boot.”

“What’s the problem? You go and fetch it.”

Our laughter in the dark basement had a surreal sound to it. I redressed his wound, but neither of us had any desire to head outside. Rummaging around in my bags, I pull out the sausage. The same one I found in the interrogator’s haversack. At the sight of this treat, my companion chuckles in astonishment.

“Fuck me, now that’s a delicacy! Where did you dig that up?”

“From your old friend, the one you lovingly battered with your rifle.”

The policeman shakes his head.

“The arsehole did love to eat! Anyway, slice it up. No point in letting it go to waste.”

When the simple knife with the wooden handle appears in my hand, however, Ivan suddenly falls silent. He looks at me with a strange expression on his face.

“That thing... Are you going to cut sausage with it?”

“Actually, I was planning to pick my nose, but I can cut the sausage while I’m at it.”

“Put it away. It’s better just to break the sausage up.”

“What’s the matter? It’s just a knife.”

“That son of a bitch used that very knife to draw human blood. I didn’t see it back there, or I’d have put it to proper use. Throw the fucking thing away!”

“That I won’t do. It’s a trophy. Let it remind me of some unpleasant moments. That way, if I meet another arsehole like that on my travels...”

My companion gives an understanding chuckle and slaps me approvingly on the shoulder. Now we can eat in peace.

After the food, it was no surprise to feel sleepy again. However, Ivan wasn’t planning on a nap. Instead, he removed and examined the bulletproof vest I’d found. It turned out that weighty piece of shit had saved him from serious trouble at least twice. On the breastplate there was a bullet mark. It was a graze, but if he hadn’t been wearing the vest, it would have put an end to his running. There was another bullet mark on the back. How and when he had been hit, neither of us could work out. Judging by the mark, however, in Ivan’s expert opinion he had probably been shot with a pistol. The bullet had not managed to damage the plate itself.

“And you’re quite a runner, by the way,” remarks Ivan approvingly. “I even lost sight of you for a while. I had to go by the sound of your shotgun firing. That’s a hell of gun, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. When I was sitting by the door, somebody came into view, and I blasted him right back through the doorway.”

“That’s no surprise. Humankind has yet to invent anything more fearsome in close-range combat than a sawn-off twelve-gauge. And yours isn’t even a sawn-off, it’s a full-size shotgun. The whack it gives will send your teeth out through your arse.”

Overall, however, we incurred significant material losses in that unexpected battle. Somewhere out there on the street or in the buildings we ran through, the assault rifle we’d picked up after the battle with the “rescuers” had been left behind. We also dropped the looted shotguns, as they made running more difficult. Ivan’s rifle had only ten rounds left in it. I still had one whole magazine, as I simply hadn’t had time to reload Shorty, which was what Ivan called my automatic weapon. I’d been running round with an empty gun. It was only now that I changed the magazine. We’d had to drop some other kit as well. As a result, the only gains from my visit to

the police headquarters that remained were Ivan's bulletproof vest and Shorty. If possible, I'd prefer to avoid that sort of operation in the future.

An hour later, my companion heads upstairs to listen and look around. When he comes back, there's a marked improvement in his mood.

"Listen, there's hardly any distance left to cover. Let's get moving quick, OK?"

Well, seeing as I have only the vaguest idea of where we are right now, it doesn't really make the blindest bit of difference which direction we set off in. I just want to get away from here. Hell knows, maybe the troops we met yesterday are particularly vicious and vengeful, and decide to scour all the buildings round about. It's best to get moving.

"If that's the way it is, let's go."

The journey really did turn out to be reasonably easy and not particularly long. Ivan knows the city a whole lot better than I do. So now he and I are sitting on the first floor of a residential building and, using the curtains as cover, examining the place he was so eager to get to. At first glance, it's nothing special. A standard concrete fence around some little one- or two-storey buildings. What's so interesting about that? My companion explains: this is the service centre for all Tarkov's police departments. As well as workshops, there are warehouses storing all sorts of equipment.

"Equipment as in spare parts?"

"Not only," says Ivan, shaking his head. "There used to be all sorts of useful stuff in there. It'd be too tempting for anyone to ignore."

"That I understand all too well. The big question is who decided not to ignore it first. Was it the same guys who mounted the assault on the headquarters?"

"Doesn't look like it. The gates are closed and there's no signs of a fight. Look, even the glass in the windows is still undamaged."

He’s right about that, the buildings all look completely normal.

“So, who’s going in? You want me to take the lead again?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “They don’t know you. They might shoot first and ask questions later. It needs to be me. I was a regular visitor here, and they’ll recognize me.”

He stands up, tightens the straps on his bulletproof vest, and checks his rifle.

“If there’s any trouble, stay down. Shorty’s no fucking use at that distance. You won’t hit anyone, you’ll just give away your position. Get out of here, and don’t come running to help me. If everything’s OK, I’ll wave at you with my left hand – like this.”

I also get to my feet. I guess I should say something. A word of encouragement? It’s quite possible that there’ll be a cold burst of automatic fire as soon as he reaches the gates, and that’ll be the end of his life right there. I’ll be watching from afar and there’ll be nothing I can do.

“Well, then, break a leg!”

“Very funny!”

He slaps me on the back and heads downstairs.

I move back to the window and look out at the gray gates and the concrete fence. A minute passes, then another, and a lone figure comes into view. Ivan is slowly walking towards the fence. His rifle is slung over his shoulder. He has a pistol, too, but that won’t be much good against several opponents, and for some reason I’m pretty sure there’s more than one person behind those gates.

Ivan suddenly comes to a halt. From the look of it, somebody’s shouted something at him. The wind’s blowing away from me, so I don’t hear the words. Suddenly, a small door opens in the gate. There’s nobody to be seen, and nobody comes out onto the street. Still, that door didn’t open

itself. Ivan steps through it, and it’s closed behind him. That’s all, I don’t see anything more.

What now, then? Should I stay or should I go? A few minutes pass, but the gate remains closed. I see no signs of life around the warehouses whatsoever. From the look of it, something went wrong. I gather my things from the floor and with an already familiar movement hump them on my back. The haversack sits on top of my backpack, on the side of which Shorty is strapped. I found him a comfortable spot – there are straps on the side of my backpack that I'd never managed to find a use for in the past. Now it turns out they’re a very convenient place to hold a gun in. My shotgun’s at my chest, ready to fire. That’s it, I’m all ready to leave. I move to the window and watch as the door in the gate slowly opens. A familiar figure appears and waves to me with his left hand.

Chapter 10

"Eat up!" says Ivan, sitting opposite me and pushing a tin of food towards me.

I still can't get over the hot cup of tea in my hands. Christ, I had no idea tea could be so good. In reality, it wasn't all that long ago that I brewed myself some tea back in my basement, but it feels like an age.

After walking through the gates, I saw defenses made of sandbags, with concrete blocks and cars forming barriers across the path. Once inside, the service centre looked remarkably different than it did from the street. It had been turned into a small but very well fortified military base. It was to here, as it turned out, that Ivan's colleagues had retreated. On their way to the headquarters, the convoy of cars had come under fire and turned in this direction. There was no answer from the duty officer on the radio, so they had decided to stay here. There were staff on duty at the base, and the warehouses were guarded by armed policemen. The total garrison at the base now amounted to around forty people. Most of them were members of the police forces, although there were also friends, and even total strangers. All the civilian specialists who hadn't managed to get themselves evacuated quickly worked out where the best place to lie up would be. Ignoring all protocol and training, the former traffic cops had opened up the weapon stores on the very first day. The maintenance staff also dragged all the vehicles that had been written off or were awaiting repairs out into the streets and used them to block all approach routes, so that there was no way to take a battering ram to the gates. Not unless you had a tank, at any rate, and where would you get one of those from?

There was a fairly wide range of supplies in the warehouses, although obviously there was a shortage of food. Uniforms, spare parts, and ammo they had in plenty, but to feed that number of people they had had to make

excursions. So far, they had gone reasonably smoothly. In the case of shootouts, the police had the upper hand thanks to their overwhelming superior strength with automatic weapons. They didn't have to save ammo, either. Nearly all the stores of the city police were kept here, so even with the most wasteful shooting they'd have plenty for quite a while. Moreover, they blasted off at everyone without worrying too much about who they were firing at. If you picked up a gun, you were a fair target, whatever your vocation in life. Let the archangels sort them out, here it's every man for himself.

"Still, they're shit out of food," says Ivan, shaking his head. "Any ideas you have about how to get supplies will, as you can imagine, be very gratefully received."

As it happens, I may have some good news for them on that front. Putting my tea aside, I explain it all to Ivan.

"Eat up then and we'll go and see the chief."

This distinguished title was held by the former commander of a squadron of the Tarkov Traffic Police, Captain Veremeyev. This short, round man turned out to be a very interesting guy to talk to. Having listened to my account of the shopkeeper I knew of, he nodded his head thoughtfully.

"It had occurred to me that somebody must be doing something of the sort. In my time I've been in quite a few trouble spots, and I'll tell you this – in that type of situation, "trading posts" like that always crop up quite organically and very quickly. Obviously, you need some pretty shady operators for that sort of business. But there's never been a shortage of them in this city, as any field officer will tell you. Thanks for the tip, we'll send some lads to see him."

"You'll be met by a guard. His name's Pavel, and his nickname's Sledgehammer. He fully lives up to it. Just take a look at his fists and you'll have no further questions. And there's all sorts of interesting types hanging round on the way there."

“Bandits?”

“More like street trash. Still, you won’t be able to stroll past them. Tell them that the Predator sent you. That’ll be enough for them to get out of the way and leave you in peace. If you give them some supplies or ammo, they’ll be grateful till the day they die. When you speak to Pavel, you should mention me. I can’t promise that it’s a solid-gold recommendation, but it’s the best you’ll get.”

The Captain frowns.

“The Predator? Who the hell’s that?”

“He’s a kind of local celebrity. He’s not really involved in the business, and he won’t bother you, but the gangbangers respect him.”

“Great,” nods Veremeyev. “We’ll go and see your shopkeeper. Do you want to come with us? The more the merrier, and safer for that matter.”

“No,” I shake my head. “I’ve still got something to deal with here. I need to find a certain person. Maybe one of your guys would know something?”

“Who’s the man you’re after?”

“He used to deal drugs and had several other lines of illegal business. He’s unscrupulous. He’ll take on anyone and he’ll sell anything. I thought the local druggies might know him, so I went to see one of them, and the little fucker ratted me out to those freaks. Well, the rest you already know.”

The Captain says nothing for a while, thinking something over.

“Those freaks are a different matter. We haven’t come across them before. Ivan told us a little about them, and we need to think about it. As for this person you’re looking for, you’ll need to talk to our field officers. We’ve got a couple who used to work these parts. If the guy used to deal, they’ll definitely know who you mean.”

“There was one guy,” nods one of the field officers I speak to, “a very cunning son of bitch, always changing his nickname. He’d open up new houses every couple of months. Not a simple guy. We never managed to get our hands on him. His customers stayed loyal and never gave him up.”

“Do you think I can find him?”

“You can try. None of us can give you a guarantee, as I’m sure you understand. I doubt very much that he’s eased off during the current chaos. In fact, I should think he’s become even more shady. Still, you can risk it if you like. He was always hanging about round the customs house, and it’s quite possible he’s still based somewhere near there.”

After a chat with the Captain, he offered to send a few men to accompany me and play along with my charade a little. Which is fine by me. It’s not as if he owes me anything. That may change after they’ve been to see the shopkeeper. That’s a whole different conversation, but until then it’s like Veremeyev is paying me a sort of advance. Plus, he’s saying thank you for saving one of his men, I suppose. For now it’s more than enough. I wasn’t expecting any favours from them. In fact, I was happy just to get fed.

For his part, Ivan threw in some ammo for my assault rifle and my shotgun. He also arranged two other useful gifts for me: in the repair workshops they changed the stock on my shotgun, replacing the old one with one of those curved fold-up things that has slots for extra shells on it. He also brought me a curious system of straps that allowed me to keep my pistol under my armpit. It turned out to be far more comfortable than the pocket I’d fashioned from an old sleeve. People do make some clever things, don’t they? And, of course, Ivan had managed to tell me a lot of useful information during our time together, and taught me some useful skills.

“Go and wait over there,” says the officer, nodding towards a little garden. “Somebody’s always keeping a lookout on that place. They see a customer and come over. Then they lead you off somewhere. That’s the way he works – if there’s more than one person, nobody shows up. We’ll wait three hours for you here, but then we’ll be leaving. Sorry.”

“Alright, you think I don’t get it? I’m grateful you got me this far, guys.”

The officer turns and nods, and my escort group heads off to the buildings across the road. While I know that they can’t actually give me any help, it warms the heart nonetheless. I also hope that whoever keeps watch over this place had a good chance to see who was accompanying me.

Half an hour passes. A chilly wind blows around the garden, whipping up columns of dirt. So far, not a soul has shown themselves. Does that mean that the officer’s information is out of date? Come to think of it, why shouldn’t it be? This was all how it worked before the chaos started, but an awful lot has changed since then. The shopkeeper’s rival may have been whacked by any one of his clients going wild from withdrawals.

“Good afternoon!”

I turn around. There’s a skinny young guy looking at me from between the branches of a decorative fir. See, it doesn’t pay to get lost in your thoughts when you’re awaiting an important meeting. I didn’t notice him approaching at all, and he could just as easily have shot me. That would have been the end of my mission.

“Greetings to you, too.”

“You here on business, or just passing by?”

“I’ve got some goods that I’d like to sell.”

“Who to, if it’s not a secret?”

“Why would it be a secret?” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “I’ve got a bit of ammo, and some rather... specific... medicine. Demand for that sort of thing’s quite limited. It’s not everybody’s business, so I’m looking for quite a specific sort of person.”

“You’re in luck,” says the boy. “Turns out there’s someone just like that not far from here. But I guess you know the rules for visiting him

already?"

"I'm standing here on my own, aren't I?"

"What about the guys who've just moved in to those buildings?"

"They're my escort. A kind man asked them to accompany me here and wait for my return. They're not planning to go any further with me. That's not their orders."

The boy nods understandingly.

"And what's the grand title of this kind man? Maybe it's somebody I know? Then you could say hi to him for me."

I think for a second. Obviously, I don't actually know any of the dealer's regular customers. If I throw out any old name it could be a mistake, as I don't know what sort of relationship the dealer might have with anybody.

"It was Mishka Dronov that told me about this place."

"Driller?"

"I'm not sure. That's not a name I know him by. I only know his real name. We've been friends for a long time, and helped each other out more than once."

The boy stays silent for a while. He tips his head, just like he's listening for something. It's only then that I notice the thin, transparent wire running from his left ear under his collar. That's an earpiece, isn't it! I've seen similar gadgets before. When the big cheeses in the corporation came to visit, their bodyguards used to run around with those things stuck in their ears.

"Yes, we know someone by that name," confirms the boy. "True, he hasn't been to see us for a while. How's he keeping?"

“Well, he was fine the day before yesterday, that I can tell you. He was even speaking clearly and comprehensibly. I left him something for his health.”

“I see. And who supplied you with the escort? That’s not a cheap service these days.”

“That’s another guy. They call him the Predator. I did him a good turn, and this is his way of paying me back.”

The boy nods. Apparently, he has no more questions. He makes an inviting gesture with his hand.

“This way, then. I hope your escort understands that it’s not a good idea to follow us.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday. And Mishka warned me all about it. They’ll stay where they are.”

The boy doesn’t say anything more, just turns and starts to walk across the square. I straighten my shotgun and follow him.

You could say that part of my mission is now complete. The dealer’s still around and in business. All other information I gather will be a plus. Still, I can’t go home just yet.

Leaving the square, we head into the narrow streets of the old city. Here, on the border between residential areas and the industrial zone, nothing new has been built – it’s not a prestigious neighbourhood. The streets are very varied: some narrow, some wide; some relatively clean, some covered with litter. All attention here was focused on the custom house and the goods that came through it. For that reason, there were a number of warehouses of all sorts, most of them no longer in use. Hardly anyone lived here anymore, and those that remained weren’t the sort to take much care about clearing up their yards.

We turn into a courtyard, go through a doorway, and find ourselves in front of a flat door.

“Leave your weapons here,” says the boy with me.

“All of them?”

“Preferably. The shotgun and the rifle, definitely.”

I look around. Behind us, standing to the left of the front door, is a guy with a sawn-off. He’s not pointing it at me yet, but... And a little further to the side, but not far enough to block a clear shot, are two more, both of them armed. These ones only have pistols. I put my shotgun on the table, and unstrap Shorty from my backpack. I look inquiringly at the boy who brought me in.

“I don’t want to seem mistrustful, I really don’t. However...”

I lay my pistol down as well.

“Do you want to look in my backpack, too?”

“No, but you’ve got a knife. I can see the point sticking out under your waistcoat.”

“This?” I open one side of my waistcoat. “You want me to take *this* off?”

Here he hesitates. There was a question on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t say it out loud.

“No, that’s enough. Everything you leave here will be looked after. Don’t worry, nothing will go missing. We do everything by the book.”

A blindfold appears in his hands.

“You want to cover my eyes?”

“Yes.”

We’re moving downwards, and some sort of stones crunch under my feet. Clearly this isn’t a normal tunnel. It’s damp. I can feel the higher

humidity all over my skin. We turn, a door scrapes, and I feel a hard floor beneath my feet. It's drier here, and a little warmer.

"You can take off the blindfold."

A fairly narrow but quite long room. Bright bulbs hang from the ceiling. So, they've got electricity here. We're in the far corner of the room, the boy who brought me is standing to the right behind me. In front of me is an office desk with a man of indeterminate age sitting behind it, dressed in military-style jacket and trousers. There's a hood over his head, and he's leaning forward, so I don't see much of his face.

"You want to see me. Why?"

"I've got some things you might want to buy."

"Many people do. But I don't welcome everyone here."

"I won't argue. I'm sure you have your reasons."

Here the man lifts his head and looks at me intently. His face is somewhat strange – high cheekbones, tight skin, fierce eyes that look straight through you, narrow lips, and a sharp nose. There's something distasteful about his appearance.

"Yes, I have my reasons not to deal with a large number of people. I only do business with those I've known for a long time, or with customers that someone can vouch for. I don't know you, so who can vouch for the fact I can trust you?"

"I'm going to assume my word won't be enough. I told your man the name of one person, and he confirmed that it's familiar to you."

"What name exactly?"

See? It looks like my trick's beginning to pay off. It's one I've used many times before. You provide your opponent with some well-known and easily confirmed facts, then you throw something else in among them.

Something that, to put it nicely, isn't obviously reliable. And your opponent swallows it all at once without thinking.

"Well, you know Dronov, don't you? He's an old customer of yours."

The thin man stays silent for a while.

"As a customer, I'd say he's too old. And he's managed to make a whole string of mistakes that don't speak well of him. So that's not the best recommendation."

"You don't trust him because he's started working with people that you don't like?"

At this, the man stands up. Turns out he's taller than me. Behind me there's a metallic click. Has the boy who brought me gone for his gun?

"Sorry, but how does that concern you? That's entirely my business, and I heartily recommend you keep your nose well out of it."

Instead of answering, I undo my waistcoat and pull one side open.

"Want to take a look at it?"

The man stands silent for a while, then returns to his seat.

"Where did you get that from?"

"Well, if I told you it was a gift, would you believe me? Unfortunately, it wasn't just you that Driller let down. He treated some old friends very badly, too. Then we had to get involved. I don't think your former customer will be giving you any more problems. There aren't many people who can afford to cross the Predator."

For a while, he drums his fingers on the desk. Then he looks up.

"Very well. We'll see about that later. What do you want today?"

"Nothing in particular. I want to become your customer, that's all."

“Have you brought anything?”

“Obviously. Fine words butter no parsnips, and all that.”

I approach the desk and start to lay out the goods I’ve brought to exchange. When the syringe appears, the dealer stops me.

“Now, where did that come from?”

“Loot from a little fight.”

He picks up the syringe, twirls it in his fingers, and brings it up to his face. It looks as if he’s smelling it.

“Have you got any more?”

“Not with me. I didn’t know what goods you’d have demand for.”

“That’s always valuable. Bring it all straight here! What else?”

After examining the whole pile of goods, he pushes some of them to one side.

“These aren’t for me, but I’ll take the rest. What do you want in return?”

I look around me.

“I see you’ve got heating and light. Me, I’ve got a bit of a problem with lights – no electricity. I’d really like to have light over my head once in a while, and a socket that works.”

The thin man thinks for a while.

“Where are you located?”

“Have you got a map of the city?”

“I’ll get one.” He nods to somebody behind me. Not the lad who brought me, he’s still standing in the same place. There’s a minute’s pause, followed by footsteps, and from behind my back another figure, whose presence I hadn’t even suspected before, appears. He goes to the desk and unfolds a map of the city. The dealer nods to me.

“Show me your neighbourhood.”

I go over to the map, turn it round, and point with a finger in the rough direction of my old flat.

“Right here.”

“That’s difficult. There aren’t any functioning cables there. At least, not as far as I know.”

“Well, I’m not planning to use an industrial freezer. My needs are pretty modest.”

“A solar panel, inverter, and batteries – would that do?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“I don’t see why not.”

“I don’t have the equipment now. It’s not a common order, and I don’t normally deal in that kind of thing. I can make an exception, however, but I’ll need time. A week. In a week’s time, my men will be waiting for you here.” The dealer indicates a point on the map. “Come in person, they won’t speak to anyone but you. Do I need to warn you that their safety will be your responsibility?”

“From the moment we meet, certainly. But I don’t see how I can guarantee anything before that. I don’t even know which way they’ll be coming.”

“My demands aren’t that unreasonable. I’m only interested in the process of handing over the goods.”

“Agreed.”

“In that case, our business is finished. One more thing...” His hand rummages through the pile of goods and pulls out the memory stick. “These you can bring me any time, and as many as you can find. Don’t bother looking for another buyer, nobody will offer more than me. From now on, you’re included in my list of customers, but only you personally, understood?”

I answer with a nod.

“In which case, we’re agreed. Escort him out.”

We walk back along the tunnel, climb the stairs, doors slam, and once again I’m standing in the same room where I surrendered my weapons. The uncommunicative guards lay out my guns in front of me. I check the bullets and take a quick look in the barrels – everything’s in order. I tuck my pistol in its new home, strap Shorty back on my rucksack, and sling the shotgun across my chest. Without saying a word, the lad who brought me opens the door and walks out into the hallway. On the way back, we’re accompanied by two more guards who appeared out of nowhere once we got about ten metres from the front door. If it hadn’t been for a reassuring gesture from my companion, I’d have been dashing for the nearest gateway. You shouldn’t play tricks with people whose nerves are on edge – my fear almost expressed itself in shooting.

We reached the square reasonably quickly and without incident. Having accompanied me to the statue, the trio then vanish silently. Hurrying towards me comes my escort group.

“You cut that pretty fucking fine!” says Veremeyev, shaking his head as he paces the room. “Another half hour and the boys would’ve left.”

“He’s dug in so deep there you’d need archaeologists to find him. From what I saw, I’d guess he’s got a few houses there, and they’ve been fitted out recently. The one I visited was certainly pretty new. When you walk through the tunnel, you can smell the dampness of the earth. It’s not been dug long. When you get down there, he must have heaters, otherwise

their teeth would be chattering from the cold and damp. I imagine he takes different customers to different places. I didn't see any goods offered for sale whatsoever. He says his boys will deliver goods to any address according to the customer's wishes. Maybe that's true, I really don't know. What I can say is that when it comes to conspiracies, that guy could give anyone a run for their money. I'm pretty sure that all the conversations I had with the boy who met me were being transmitted somewhere else by radio. Basically, he's got everything worked out, and there's no shortage of hiding places round the customs house."

The Captain bites his lip.

"Yeah, that dealer's a little out of our league. Shame... Still, thanks for the information. Our boys will escort you to the edge of the district, but after that I'm afraid you're on your own. The convoy going to your shopkeeper left this morning."

"Worry not, I'll make it back somehow."

What I'd like to know is, where's this unforgivable impudence of mine coming from? OK, so the memory stick ended up in the general pile of goods entirely by accident. I had no idea that the thin man would jump on it like that. As for my demands, I made them up on the spot. I simply wanted to find out what the stuff I'd brought was worth. Morphine's always in demand, of course. The pistol bullets, the gold trinkets, and the rest of the junk all had a certain value, but it definitely wasn't enough to buy such a complicated piece of technology. Nonetheless, he went for the deal. That can only mean one thing – the memory stick was worth an awful lot to him. In general, the whole incident with the dealer looked like a massive bluff, leaving aside the fact that my "bodyguards" were nothing of the sort, and had been provided by Veremeyev entirely for his own purposes. All my tall tales and subtle hints about mysterious protectors were also pretty hard to swallow. I doubt that a seasoned drug dealer bought them. That left only the memory sticks. What does everyone want them for? Lest we forget, our interrogator in the tunnel had a whole collection of them. How many people did he do away with to get hold of those keys, I wonder? And what I'd really like to know is what the hell they open.

* * *

“Did he leave?”

“Yes, boss. His guards were waiting in the place appointed. As you ordered, we had a good look at them. They’re clearly professionals – bulletproof vests, helmets, and good weapons. They don’t look like novices.”

“I didn’t think so. What would you say about our visitor?”

“Strange guy.”

“More than that, I’d say. I had my first doubts when he started putting out the things he wanted to sell on the desk. He made a clumsy move, and a box of bullets fell out. Nothing special, you’d have thought, but these ones had blue paint on the tips.”

“What does that mean?”

“I thought nothing of it at first. Then something stirred in my brain, and I called Pyotr. He’s our weapons specialist, after all. I also asked for him to be given a list of the guns our guest had left at the guard post.”

“Is that all?”

“What do you think? Are there many people who’d risk openly carrying a knife taken from the sect? I’d say anyone who does that is either a complete moron who’s only managed to live this long by extreme good fortune, or they’re a very dangerous opponent. Pyotr confirmed in part my suspicions. Did you see the guns he had?”

“A mini-AK, a shotgun, and a pistol with silencer.”

“The mini-AK’s nothing special. But that’s no ordinary shotgun, it’s a Mossberg 590 with special modifications. That’s a pretty rare gun round these parts. His pistol’s no standard police Yarygin, either. It’s a SIG Sauer

P220. That's not a common gun even in Europe, and certainly not in that edition. Even the bullets are special subsonic rounds for use with a silencer. Pyotr helped me make an accurate assessment of the guy. He's a man used to working at close range, point-blank even. He's not just some average Scav, he's a killer. A killer capable of getting right up close to his target. Moreover, he's not trying to hide his profession. He mentioned Driller. What do you know about that guy?"

"Just a regular customer like all the others."

"There can't be many others like him! Dronov is a very high-class programmer and a talented hacker. Among his clients have been the sort of people who hack bank accounts professionally. Getting through other people's defenses is a question of not if but when for him. And our guest was the one sent to deal with him. Who did he manage to piss off that badly?"

"Well, chief, if it's like that..."

"Do you have any other explanation?"

"No, not yet."

"He mentioned a name – the Predator. Find out everything about him. Who is this mysterious guy who sends out professional killers as his representatives? I have to know!

Chapter 11

So here I am again, going all around the houses. Looking back, I'm genuinely surprised that I actually managed to get here. I've certainly become a little more careful now. I've gained some experience, probably. I don't look at doors and windows the same way anymore. I perceive sounds completely differently. And when I see a flash of sunlight reflecting off anything metal, I immediately try to duck out of the way of potential sniper fire. True, I doubt those snipers are actually sitting at every corner, but better safe than sorry.

For the night, as usual, I break into an abandoned flat. Ivan came up with a great idea, and now when I close the door I always stick a piece of plastic between the top of the door and the frame. On top of it, I place the same mixture of spoons, forks and so forth. The slightest shove on the door thus produces a thundering cascade of cutlery that's enough to wake the dead. It's also on Ivan's advice that I always break open two flats, setting up my noise trap in one, and actually sleeping in the other. If somebody comes up the stairs, they'll always pop into the closest flat first. When they hear all the noise and commotion, they'll search every square inch in there, but find nothing. I, meanwhile, will be woken up by the clatter and have time to get ready to meet them.

In fact, the former policeman turned out to be a very savvy expert on a number of matters. I was very lucky to spend a few days in his company. It's no exaggeration to say that he was an excellent teacher. And I hope it's fair to say that I'm not the worst student, either.

The next day dawned prosaically gray like all the ones before it. Sticking close to buildings as usual as I made my way, it occurred to me all of sudden just how difficult it would be to get about once the first snow had fallen. The leaves will fall, and the rich shrubbery that formed the main

decoration of the city will no longer provide cover for people to move around in. What's going to happen then? My footprints will inevitably lead straight to my hideout, and it's not likely there'll be any street sweepers out clearing the snow any time soon.

A gun fires somewhere around, and I immediately I'm all ears. I dash for the cover of the nearest wall and freeze. A few seconds pass, and there's another rattle of gunfire. The shootout gets hotter and hotter, with neither side sparing their ammo. To be frank, I couldn't give a shit about their bickering. Whatever it is they're fighting over, it's got nothing to do with me. I just want to get past them, and there's no need to involve me in the argument. I've got enough problems of my own. Sadly, getting round the spot they've chosen for their showdown isn't going to be easy. To the left is a public park, wide open and easy to fire on, and to the right is the long, high fence of some factory or other. At the best of times, you'd think long and hard before trying to get over it. Besides, I have absolutely no idea what's on the other side. Very well, I'll try to keep shuffling along in the shadow of the buildings.

For the first three hundred metres, I literally crawl on my hands and knees, expecting to be shot at any moment. But it seems like the fighters don't have time to look around them. I guess they can see their opponents clearly enough as it is.

Through a gap in the bushes, I see a car keeled over on its side. Working out what exactly happened to it and why it can't go any further is a long way down my list of priorities right now. All that matters is that right next to it are lying a couple of unfamiliar guys, obdurately spraying everything in the vicinity with lead. From somewhere to one side, their opponents pummel them in return. There's no way to tell who's attacking and who's defending. Frankly, who gives a shit?

I lie down on my belly and ever so slowly crawl past them. Your squabbles have nothing to do with me. I'm already past the car that's spitting fire. Behind me to the right, an assault rifle is hammering away methodically. Here's a courtyard that I can turn into at last, and get as far away from here as possible. I'm already unimaginably tired of all this. I'm sweating like I've been carrying the beam, and my backpack keeps

climbing up the back of my head. Wait a bit, it's got a waist strap! Why the hell haven't I been using it? I get round the corner and slither down the steps to a door leading into the basement. Here I can crouch for a while and get myself together. I've got past the main gunfight, so there's a chance I'll be able to get away unnoticed. I get my breath back a little. Once I've got a little further away, I'll be able to sit down and have a proper rest. I'll be able to dry my shirt out at last.

Holding my shotgun at the ready, I climb up the steps and bump into a great big guy in camouflage. The man is sitting a metre from the steps and aiming his assault rifle at something in the distance. It seems that while I was having a breather by the basement entrance, he was quietly making his way over here. Clearly, he's not after me.

But how do I explain that to him? Hearing movement behind him, the guy turns straight round to face me and aims his rifle barrel. One of us is about to get shot. But I pull the trigger first. The shotgun gives a deafening report as usual, and the guy is thrown over on his back. I jump out from the stairwell and see a few more men about twenty metres away. By the look of it, they were what the guy I've just shot was aiming at. They're at a disadvantage, as they're standing either side on or with their backs to me. If I start firing now, then I'll hit practically all of them. Of course, at this distance, the buckshot is considerably less deadly, but it can still cause some nasty wounds. And none of them know what my shotgun's loaded with. On the other hand, I'm not planning to shoot them. All I want to do is get out of here.

We're at an impasse. They're afraid to move, in case it prompts me to start shooting, and I don't know how best to walk away. The greater the distance between us, the greater their advantage. Finally, I make up my mind. I slowly raise my left hand and make a gesture that means something like: "Go on, lads, get out of here." Apparently, they understand it, and begin to move backwards towards the nearest corner. I step away in the other direction – one step, two steps, and I jump round the corner. Time for me to get out of here as quickly as possible.

It'd probably be difficult for me to explain how attached one can get to inanimate objects. And not even an object in this case. When I get back

into my basement, I suddenly feel a surprising affection for it. It may just be an ordinary office, and one that I visited with remarkable frequency in the past. We drank here and hung out with girls here, but I'd obviously never have thought of it as home. Now, however, I sit in the massive shag pad, and I feel a pang in my heart. Why, you might well ask? Probably because here I can finally be myself. I don't have to maintain the constant pretense of being the mysterious messenger of some no less mysterious authority. I don't need to keep making up tall tales and lying to people who, for whatever reason, I've taken a shine to. I would happily have stayed at the service depot with the captain and his men, but sadly I'm of no use to them. With no serious military skills whatsoever, a guy like me would just be running round under their feet. I'd be a distraction to people who had serious work to do. No, in the end it's better to be a fond memory than to be a burden. Their friendliness towards me could change very fast.

If memory serves, there was some brandy left somewhere. Or rather my brandy blend. I pour myself half a glass and knock it back in one. Oof! I'll end up an alcoholic in no time. Although I fear there's no real risk of that. Not for lack of alcohol, you understand, but because it seems highly unlikely I'll live long enough to develop an addiction. Sooner or later, my luck will run out. For now, it's hard to say exactly when, but I know it's not worth kidding myself on that score. Right here, right now, human life isn't worth a hill of beans. Today as ever is, without flinching or blinking, I killed a man in cold blood. A man who, quite possibly, meant me no harm at all. But, on the other hand, he would have pulled the trigger without thinking twice. And I doubt very much that his conscience would have given him much trouble afterwards. Bad luck – his opponent shot first. It's a cruel twist of fate that, judging by his appearance and the manner in which he swung round to face me, he was an experienced and well trained fighter. And he was killed by me, just an ordinary cubicle slave not so long ago. It's a funny thing, life.

The brandy has its usual effect fairly quickly, and after a few minutes my thoughts stop tormenting me. Time for bed. Everything else can wait. Right now I want to sleep. In my dreams again I see Ninelle, and I feel a special warmth inside.

* * *

I'm back on familiar territory, watching the buildings that surround the bandits' nest. This time I see a sentry walking steadily backwards and forwards along a set path. He's already stamped out a track. I drag a large chest of drawers to the window, throw the mattress from the bed on top of it, and climb aboard. Now we lie here and watch.

After a few hours, it's clear that there's nothing very complex about the system here. The sentry follows the same route, and every two hours he's relieved. His replacement comes out from somewhere round the corner, they nod at each other, and the previous sentry returns to base. I can't see the other side of the base, but I doubt they've dreamed up a completely different system there. Why would they? I doubt they've had any more unexpected visitors since I was here, and a bunch of thugs like that don't have the brains to see more than a day into the future.

There's a reason I chose this direction. Behind the sentry's back, right next to the building, I spotted the cover to a cable duct. When I started out in computers, I helped some guys I knew to lay fibre optic cable, build the networks, and install cable TV. There was high demand for the service at the time, and plenty of money to be made. So we ended up crawling around in these cable ducts. Not this one in particular, but they're all much the same. Looking at the cover, I can make a very good estimate of how far away the next one will be. As that's the case, I can quite calmly make my way underground, out of view of the sentry, wait for the change of shifts, and then emerge above ground right next to the building. At the end of his shift, the sentry always hangs around by the corner his replacement appears from. There's nothing wrong with that, as he can see the whole path of his patrol route from there, and he'll probably see any unwelcome visitors. The cover of the cable duct, however, is hidden by a corner of the building. If I can get out of there fast and scramble through an open window on the ground floor, there's a chance I can get past unnoticed.

I'm not crawling anywhere today, however. It's getting dark, and the bandits probably put out extra sentries when night comes. I've read that's

what all serious units would do. While I wouldn't describe these guys as serious, I can't discount the possibility that one of them has read the same books with lurid covers that I have. Better that I spend the night at home.

The next morning finds me at the same observation point. After watching for an hour, I'm convinced that nothing has changed radically overnight. I finally leave the flat and head off to find my way into the cable duct. Under normal circumstances, I'd have found it in fifteen minutes. Now, however, with the need to keep a sharp eye out all the time, it takes around two hours. I have to avoid all dangerous places, and one of the shafts to the cable duct is just too exposed.

Jumping into the duct, I carefully close the cover behind him. Once I've moved around fifty metres along the duct, I tie a thread across an easily identifiable space, using my torch for light. On my way back, I'll be able to check if anyone's followed me.

From there, I start to move a little faster. The duct is dry, and I don't smell anything funny in there. The city authorities set great store by communications networks and digitization, and at one time made considerable efforts to ensure that the industry was properly supported by municipal services. They installed brand new ducts, laid the bundled cables in them, and generally did it all with a great deal of care and attention.

Strangely enough, the ubiquitous amateur archaeologists who regularly shocked the population with the "terrible" discoveries they made in the city's various tunnels turned up their noses at this particular section of the underground municipal facilities. Apparently, it wasn't old enough for them, and there just wasn't any chance of finding anything interesting. Even the laziest of housewives would be able to work out that there weren't going to be any signs of ancient treasure in a brand-new cable duct.

Checking with the markings on the walls, I find the turn I need. In this respect, everything's very simple down here. The network planners split the city into several squares and gave each one a number. If you look at the sign and see "Number One" that means that the tunnel you're in runs along the city's central street. Everything that starts with a one runs parallel to it. An even number indicates a perpendicular branch. The second figure identifies

the direction the tunnel is going in. An odd number means from north to south, and even number from west to east. The third figure refers to a specific district. There are no letters involved – not Russian nor Latin. For someone in the know, it's all simple and easily understandable. If it's not, then you've got no business being down here.

The district the bandit's den was located in had the number two hundred and fifty one. I found the exit I required fairly quickly. I check my watch. There's still twenty five minutes till the change of guard. I sit on the floor, turn off my torch, and wait calmly. I try to picture how the bandit sentry is moving around up there. From what I was able to gather while I was watching them, they put the same guys on sentry duty all the time. You'd have to assume they're guys without any great fighting skills – the sort it would be sensible to entrust with the least important duties.

My watch vibrates soundlessly on my wrist – time to move! I press the light button and see the sentries will swap over in five minutes. The bandits aren't the most punctual lot, and the replacement may arrive a little late, but the sentry will already be hanging round the corner of the building.

I climb up the ladder and push at the hatch with my shoulder. It rises with a quiet scraping sound. I take a quick look left and right. Nobody's around. I raise the cover higher. The path is empty. I open the hatch and roll on my side, keeping a hold of the cover. It's still quiet. I lower the heavy metal back in place, and crouch on my haunches. No, I can't see anyone. Now to get to the building fast.

I run over to the wall, put my foot on the base, jump up, and grab the window ledge with both hands. I push with my feet, and here I am inside already. I press myself against the wall and look both ways. I'm in a kitchen. The kitchen of a normal flat. Broken glass. From the look of it, the owners forgot to close the window on their way out, and the wind did the rest. Crouching down, I move into the hallway and check the front door straight away. Which means the bandits have almost certainly not been in here yet. Returning to the room, I rip open the cupboards and tip the contents onto the floor. That way, everyone will think the flat's been searched and there's nothing to look for in here. I also open the window in the room. Not wide open, I just unfasten the catch. I won't close the door to

the flat, and the wind will quickly do the rest. I need to get this place into as inhospitable a condition as possible to make sure nobody gets it into their head to move in here.

I can just imagine what it would be like if I tumbled over the window ledge to find a bandit lying on the sofa, staring at me in amazement. That's the sort of encounter I don't fucking need. In one cupboard, I found a bottle of vodka, which went straight into my backpack. I now always keep enough food for a couple of meals, shells for the shotgun, and couple of packs of bullets for my pistol in there. It turned out that the stores the captain's group had taken over contained a fair quantity of the right calibre ammo, so Ivan gave me several packs of bullets. When I showed the guy in charge of the stores my bullets with the blue tips, he just shrugged his shoulders.

"Obviously they're some kind of special round, but we don't have any of those here. You'd have to try the foreigners for those. We have no need of them."

"Is there anyone who might know what they are?"

"You'd have to ask the Quartermaster."

"Who's that?"

"He's just a guy... Believe it or not, he really was a quartermaster. He's always been in the arms business. Rumour has it that he's now got a store somewhere, where he trades guns and ammo. Obviously, that's not all he sells, but that's his speciality. He's the guy you'd need to ask!"

Thinking on this, I put the pack of ammo deep in my rucksack. Who knows, perhaps they're not meant for this pistol. I've only got the one magazine for it, so if anything goes wrong I won't even be able to reload it.

When I leave the flat, I go as usual to the top floor. That's where you get the best view from. Down in the yard, the scene is the same as before. It's still the bandits' outdoor kitchen. True, there have been some changes – someone's made a wall out of boxes, seemingly as a windbreak, and stretched a sheet of tarp over part of the yard. Well, that's a sign of stability.

Clearly the group is getting settled in and not planning to leave here any time soon. Further proof of this is provided by a woodpile stacked in one corner, next to which two guys are sawing at a log. In other words, they've laid in supplies of fuel. Obviously they've found themselves someone with a domestic bent, who's decided to get the place organized. It's not like they had sentries before, either, for that matter.

I take a look at the surrounding buildings. Just as I thought. Makeshift stove chimneys are sticking out of the windows of the building opposite. You'd imagine the bandits are quartered pretty close together, so the chances of bumping into anyone in the building I'm in now are relatively small. I can't discount the possibility that someone might come over here closer to evening, but for now there's nobody around.

Meanwhile, down in the yard there's a little movement. A few men emerge from the building where the bandits are quartered. Two more come out of the two-storey building where the gang leader used to live – the big man who came to meet me and another, shorter guy. From the look of it, the leadership have decided not to move their headquarters. Very well, let's see what happens next.

My plan was to watch what they were up to a little longer, work out where their leader was sleeping, and then pay him a visit closer to evening. Not to gun him down with my pistol, as I'd done with the last one, but to do my impression of the messenger from the mysterious authority. I needed to make sure I was well prepared, which is why I'd planned to spend a day or two getting ready.

I could of course head straight to see the shopkeeper, but who the hell knows what arrangement the bandits and Sledgehammer might have come up with in my absence. They could well have decided to cut out the middleman, and instead of a friendly smile I could be met with a pistol bullet. It made sense to establish the way things now stood with the bandits' leader first.

The bandits in the yard line up in an uneven rank. The leader walks past them, explaining something and making energetic gestures with his hands. It appears he's giving orders to his henchman for their latest

excursion. I try to assess the gang's armaments. They've got the same old shotguns, double-barrel and pump-action. I see one of them has an assault rifle. Two of them appear to have no visible guns at all, but they're also no longer carrying baseball bats. I guess it's finally got through to them that a piece of wood isn't much use against a rifle. Presumably, those two have pistols, which also have their uses.

The briefing's over, and the bandits head for the exit in a disorderly crowd. Aha, so that's where it is. The leader's companion also heads into the building, while the leader himself, after pacing on the spot, turns and heads to the far corner of the courtyard. There, behind a low fence, stand a handful of wooden cabins of unmistakable function. You have to give the bandits' housekeeper his due – he's thought of everything.

So, what if... Almost tumbling out of the window, I take a good look round. The courtyard is empty. Sure, there are sentries keeping watch on the outer perimeter. But it's daytime, the gang appears to be out on business, and there shouldn't be anyone loitering round here. And, as the old saying goes, the privy is the place a king visits on foot. On his own, too.

I dash down the stairs and take another glance around the courtyard – still empty. There's just the two lumberjacks still busy over by the woodpile. I shove my hands in my pockets and walk unhurriedly over to the little fence. While I was still upstairs, I marked the cabin being used by the leader. He wasn't carrying any visible weapon, but I can't rule out the possibility that he's got a pistol, so this is how we'll play it.

Have you ever tried to get off the bog in a hurry? If not, then give it a go. It's an unforgettable experience, I can assure you. Somehow you've got to pull up your pants, and not fall over. A pistol will be the last thing you're thinking about. From what I remember from my army days, a soldier on duty would hang his bayonet belt on a hook. I imagine the bandit boss is no dumber than the average soldier, so there should be a similar hook in each of the cabins.

Stepping up to the rear of the cabin, I bang hard on the wood with the butt of my pistol.

“Someone’s got a fucking nerve! Have you not had a good punch in the face recently?”

“Greetings from the Predator!” With these words, I step back behind the open door of the neighbouring cabin. Now, even if the leader strains all his senses, he’s not going to be able to see through the cracks in the walls where I’m standing. He’ll still be able to hear my whisper, though.

“Who? Ah, I see.”

“Don’t come out. Stay sitting where you are. Did the convoy come past?”

“The former cops?”

“That’s the one. They should have given you something.”

“That they did. They chucked some ammo and a couple of guns our way.”

“Did they say who it was from?”

This was a worrying question. The captain could well have decided that it was better to get the bandits’ gratitude for himself, rather than passing on a favour from a mysterious stranger.

“They did. Give him all our thanks.”

“See, I told you we’d come in useful. How’s your business going?”

“We’ve got some new lads, and we took control of a couple more streets.”

“Was there any resistance?”

“There was some trash loitering around, but nothing serious.”

“Good work. Do you need anything else?”

“We need guns. We’ve got a little ammo, for now.”

“Alright. We’ll do what we can. Now, count to a hundred.”

Returning to my observation post, I had the opportunity to watch how the boss tore strips off his negligent sentries. Springing out of the cabin as soon as a minute was up, he dashed straight into the barracks, and literally a few seconds later his flustered men came running out. The last to emerge was the leader himself. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but from his gestures alone it was easy enough to get the gist of the speech he was giving.

The change of guard trotted off, and a few minutes later the three sentries were standing before the boss.

It makes for quite a scene. If only I had a video camera to record it. Still, however entertaining it may be, I need to think about myself. Choosing a very obviously looted flat, I crawl out onto its balcony, which faces into the courtyard. On the way, I grab a rolled up blanket and rip pieces off it to shove carefully between the veneer of the balcony and the floor. That way nobody can see me from the balconies next door, and certainly not from downstairs. As for anyone who runs into the flat, one look at the desolation and destruction will be enough. The bandits aren’t that great in number right now, and they just won’t have the time to search all the nearby buildings thoroughly before nightfall.

It’s simple logic – anyone who shits right on your doorstep will do anything they can to get as far away from you as possible. So, from the bandits’ point of view, I should be running hell for leather out of here right now. That’s what a normal person would do, but there’s a reason why they say that all system administrators are a little fucked in the head. I can confirm it’s quite true, although there may be some exceptions. Nonetheless, that’s exactly why I’m not running anywhere, and instead lying on this balcony and listening to the bandits swear as they search the courtyard and the surrounding buildings.

As I expected, they don’t have time to finish their search before darkness comes, and they go on running round the houses, making

considerable noise in the process. They've already been up and down this staircase, by the by. But nobody bothered even to peak inside the flat I'm in. I guess they know that it was looted long ago and there's nothing useful inside it. Waiting until the sound of footsteps has died down below, I get up and slowly walk down the stairs. I hear voices in the courtyard and on the next door staircase somebody is recklessly smashing down a door – basically, everyone's busy.

Looking out of a ground-floor window, I see the dark figure of a sentry who, gaze fixed intently on the surrounding darkness, marches up and down along his path. If my predictions are correct, when darkness has completely fallen he will, as before, move into one of the ground-floor flats and keep watch from there. His view from there is more limited, but on the other hand he's completely out of sight from any encroaching bad guys. After ten minutes, the sentry turns and heads over to the corner. Now he'll turn round it, take twenty steps forward, and then turn again. He won't have much further to go after that. It's unlikely that he'll go into a flat in the first entryway. No doubt he'll get at least as far as the second. So in other words whatever happens I'll have a full minute at least. Time enough to run to the cable duct.

Once I've lowered the heavy metal cover back in place, I barely have the strength left even to move along the tunnel. Fuck it, I've done the main part. Now I can just sit and rest.

Chapter 12

Today's the day I visit Mr. Ogryzko. I dig around in my stuff and choose what's suitable to trade. I twirl the memory stick in my hand thoughtfully. Would it be better to palm it off on the shopkeeper, or should I try to read it by myself?

Let's say, now I've got Dronov's laptop, I try. There's some other bits and pieces that go with the computer and it's high time I got round to sorting them out; it's just I keep having more important things to do. The time has come, though – when I get back from the shopkeeper's today I'll get down it. Once everything's set up, I'll have a go at the memory stick while the laptop has some battery left. I certainly won't be selling the computer for now. There's no chance Misha would be using some shitty laptop. If it was on his desk, you can be sure it was loaded up with everything you could possibly need, and the chances of finding another computer like it round here are more than a million to one.

I didn't find all that much stuff to take to the shop. On the other hand, trade in goods wasn't what I was hoping to profit from this time. One way or another, I'd completed the shopkeeper's task. You could say I'd gone above and beyond, in fact. And I'd sent him some pretty good customers. It's fair to say he owes me one.

The street greeted me with a piercing wind. It raised dust from the ground and tossed around scraps of paper and other rubbish. Pressing close to the walls as always, I walk the familiar route. Say what you will, but my tramping around the city has brought results – I see my surroundings with completely different eyes now. Here's a good place to set an ambush, and that window's perfect for shooting down the street. I guess I'm a different person now, too. The calm and peaceable guy who used to live in my flat has disappeared. I guess he died along with his workmates that day when

the unknown soldiers started shooting and set fire to the car. Or maybe he died later, at the moment when I pushed the beam carriers out of the landing window. One way or the other, he's gone now, and in his place there's a completely different person – cunning, suspicious, cynical, and mean. There's plenty more bad words you could use to describe him, and all of them would be true. Quite unexpectedly, I don't see the people I've killed in my dreams. Pangs of conscience and other torments don't bother me. Take just the last guy that I killed, simply because he didn't manage to pull the trigger first. The only thing that bothers me is that I didn't manage to take his assault rifle.

Cynical I may be, but you try walking in my shoes. How else can I survive in this world? My moral compass and everything else I was guided by before all went down the drain in an instant. Nobody round here needs a peaceable systems administrator, but mean and predatory beasts are in high demand. There's just no other way to survive.

And there's the familiar little building. Somewhere nearby is the bandits' guard post. You should see the improvements they've made. At the corner of the street there's an orderly structure of sandbags. Somehow or other, they've even dragged a few concrete blocks over and laid them across the road in front of it. Seems like a good idea. Otherwise, a car with a decent run-up could smash straight into those sandbags and knock the barricade straight over. Anyone behind it would immediately become a target. The concrete means a car won't even get to the sandbags.

I approach, and a head appears from behind the sandbags.

"Hey, mate! Stop fucking around. We don't wave guns around here."

"Who's in charge here?"

"Who do you need exactly?" asks the sentry quizzically.

"You've got a guy who goes to see the shopkeeper. He'll do."

"Then sit here and wait."

I sit down on a concrete block and try to look carefree. To be honest, that's not at all easy. I know that there are several more bandits sitting behind the barricade. If they were all to suddenly jump out at me... No, it's better not to think of things like that.

"Who's asking after me?" Chewing something as he walks, the guy I took to see the shopkeeper appears from behind the sandbags.

"He's sitting over there," says the sentry, nodding in my direction.

I stand up and turn slowly to face the barricade.

It's the moment of truth. What's the bandit going to do when he sees my familiar face? What's the deal they now have with the shopkeeper? Sure, I talked to their boss yesterday and was somewhat reassured, but right here in front of the bandits' barricade all my doubts return.

"You?" says the bandit, with a nervous gulp. "Go on through, of course."

"Hey, what about his gun?" protests the sentry.

"Shut it, you!" snaps the bandits' trade envoy. "He's from the Predator. That's one of his men."

The sentry's mouth drops.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" He moves to one side, leaving the path free.

"How's things here?" I ask the other bandit, who walks beside me.

"Everything's good. We explained the way things are to everyone, and buried the ones too dumb to understand. We're getting by."

"Good to know. You can go back now. I've got some serious business to discuss with Ogryzko."

"Fair enough. I'm Vova the Awl, for future reference."

“I’ll remember that.”

And off he goes, leaving me to walk on alone.

So, my plan worked after all.

A long time ago back in by old life, I once met a very interesting guy at a party. It was a celebration of the anniversary of some joint venture or other – the details of the project are lost in the mists of time. The party was a raging success – the crowd was going wild, and all the girls were dancing round a five-piece band that tore through a rollicking set. I flopped down at a table over to one side by the window with a glass of champagne in my hand. I urgently needed something to eat, and there was a plate of sandwiches on the table.

“Hangover?” asked someone beside me.

I turned to see a middle-aged man sitting at the table. He was quietly well-dressed, and sitting in a way that didn’t attract attention. There was a glass of beer on the table in front of him that he didn’t touch.

“That’s the problem,” I nod in agreement. “Some alcohol should do the trick.”

“Not if you keep drinking that champagne.”

And with that we started chatting. From what he said, I worked out that my new acquaintance was head of security for one of the VIP guests present at the event. Unexpectedly, he turned out to be a very interesting companion. So much so that I forgot all about what I’d been planning to do next, and stayed there at the table with him. It was from him that I learned this interesting concept.

“It’s called ‘raising a dragon’. When you arrive in a new place, nobody knows you, and you need to establish your authority from nothing. If you’re not alone and you’ve got your wits about you, it’s quite possible to manage. Your team has to support you all the way, but together you’ll be able to achieve a great deal. However, there are situations where you won’t

be getting any help from anyone. Then you have to choose a very different method."

The man turns towards the room and watches the dancers for a while.

"You see that long-haired guy over there?"

"The one hopping around on the left there?"

"That's the one. Now, imagine that we call him the dragon."

"What for?"

"If I were to go outside right now, could you distract him for a couple of minutes and get him out of the room?"

"Of course."

"Now imagine that I meet a couple of guys in the corridor and give them a good hiding, making sure nobody sees me. Then I return into the room and sit back down. You then bring that guy back in. Sooner or later, the men I've beaten will come to and head in here. Obviously, there'll be a scandal. Everyone will be looking for their attacker. Which is when I subtly drop the question of who was out of the room when they got their heads kicked. As I left long before it happened, nobody will suspect me. Moreover, I brought up the question myself, which means it can't be me. Now, you'd don't look much like a fighter, do you? Well, that long-haired guy does. He's taller than you and stronger. Sure, nobody will be able to prove anything, but the suspicion will be there. After that, it's plain sailing. A few more similar situations, some subtle hints here and there, and soon everyone's keeping out of his way. And then you've raised a dragon. You can use his name to scare little kids."

I laugh. It all seems completely unbelievable. My companion shakes his head reproachfully.

"But that's just a theory," I say. "In real life it's all much more complicated."

“Once upon a time in a far-off land,” sighs my companion, “there was a war. There was no clear front line, and the two opposing side occasionally made excursions into enemy territory. I only had a small team of men, and we couldn’t cover the whole area. That’s when we started laying mines. Not just mines, but traps designed to catch and kill several men at once. By and by, I started putting round a rumour that a mysterious group of minelayers had appeared in the area, that nobody had seen or knew anything about. Anywhere where I laid a mine, we placed an ordinary glass. It could be standing on a tree stump, hanging from a branch, or just lying in the middle of the road. For ages, nobody could understand what the point was. Then one day a large enemy group appeared in our territory. We didn’t have time to put up proper defenses round the village they were heading for, and we didn’t have enough men. So, I tied a glass to a pillar, and we took up defensive positions. The enemy came, saw the now familiar sign, and turned back. They’d learned the lesson all too well – a glass means death. And they believed it. That’s how we raised a local dragon. The unknown is always more scary. Someone you can’t see is always scarier than the man standing in front of you.”

It was those words in particular that I’d remembered. Sadly, the time when I could have benefited from proper military training was long past. Still, it’s far from certain that my life would be better if I had. It’s quite possible it could have ended long before now. So, we’ll have to make do with what we’ve got.

What we’ve got is a very ordinary civilian. Now matter how much practice I’m getting these days at shooting and the other deadly arts, I’ll never catch up with those that long ago devoted themselves to them. And, even if I do mysteriously develop spectacular skills, it’s always worth remembering the classical example of Achilles and the tortoise. Just as he was never going to catch up with the reptile, so I was never going to equal those guys. There’s no point in pretending that as I progress they’re simply resting on their laurels. We’re in no situation to relax round here. Anybody who stands still is going to lose out to those who are moving forward.

So, if I want to live, I don’t have all that many options. This is the one I chose. Maybe I can’t become a great special forces warrior myself, but

I'm quite capable of creating a virtual one, or a whole group of them, and imbuing them with the most unbelievable talents. My task is to maintain the existence of this legend in any way I can. So far, it's going well, but we'll see what happens in the future.

There's a familiar scrape of bolts, and the door to the shop opens.

"Aha! I had a feeling you were coming. Back when the cops turned up and passed on your greetings, I told them you'd be along yourself soon. You're a tough bugger, aren't you?" Such was Pavel's greeting.

"You're no weakling yourself, from what I can see."

"We do what we can. Healthy lifestyle and all that. Come on in, the boss has been waiting for you."

I take the shotgun off my back and place it in the basket, then pull my pistol from under my shoulder and put it in the same place.

"Should I unload them?"

"We'll manage without."

Another sign of trust, which is nice. And here comes the proprietor of this admirable establishment.

"Your dealer's alive," I announce in place of a greeting. "And his business is going the same as before."

"Alive, you say. I can't say that's happy news."

"That's the way it is. His security system is pretty impressive. There's no way whatsoever for a stranger to get in there."

"But you got inside, didn't you?"

"It wasn't easy, and I had a recommendation. There are some people even he'll listen to."

The shopkeeper chuckles.

“Don’t start bullshitting me now. You didn’t even know who he was a few days ago. And now you’ve found these friends with connections?”

“It was only because of some old friends of mine that I got to see him at all. Without them, I wouldn’t have got within a mile of him, but those guys are scary enough that even he had to agree to a meeting.”

“Yeah, fucking right,” sneers Artemiy. “Why didn’t you go see them earlier, then, rather than loitering round here?”

“Look, I’ve known these guys for a long time. If you’ve forgotten, I used to work as a system administrator. Basically, I looked after computer networks, and not always official ones, if you get my meaning. Everybody needs an IT guy, whether their business is legal or not. The money they pay’s exactly the same colour, and it doesn’t smell any different either. Thing is, you can’t go and see those guys empty-handed either. Deadbeats aren’t welcome anywhere, as you yourself said. Your assignment happened to come at just the right time – a little present for them had fallen into my hands. You can ask Pavel – he saw what I was going around with earlier, and what I’m carrying now.”

For a while, the shopkeeper rolls a nail around on the counter while he works something out. Then he raises his eyes to me.

“Alright, let’s say you’re not bullshitting. That’s a conversation for another occasion. I need to think a bit more about that. For now, I’ll say this – you did the job. Did it very well, in fact. So now I’m in your debt, and I don’t like being in anyone’s debt for long.”

He lays on the counter a camouflage vest with a huge number of pockets and all sorts of straps.

“It’s webbing, but not only. The foreigners call it something like a “plate carrier”. Which means that you can put armour plates in it, and you end up with something between webbing and a bulletproof vest. It’ll stop birdshot, buckshot, and pistol bullets. I’m not so sure about automatic fire,

so best not to expose yourself to any. I'll give you a couple of plates, and the rest will have to be for money, I'm afraid.

I take the thing in my hands. It's well put together and pretty solid even to look at.

"I'll take it."

"Have you got an assault rifle?"

"Shorty."

The shopkeeper frowns thoughtfully.

"Ah, you mean a mini-AK?"

Ivan said something of the sort, I remember.

"That's right."

"The standard model, I'd imagine?"

"What else would it be?"

"Bring it here, and the boys will put something useful on it. We'll get you a silencer you can use with normal bullets, and a sight of some sort."

"Alright."

"And from me personally, there's a case of tinned meat, the same of sardines, and three boxes of soups of some kind. Are we even?"

"That's good with me. Is it alright if I don't take everything at once?"

"Take it a tin at a time, if you want. See that cupboard over there on the right? I'll put it all in there."

"Suits me."

The shopkeeper offers me his hand, and I shake.

“At some point, there’ll be some more work for you, but that comes later. There’s this one woman they call the Therapist. She trades in all sorts of medicine, and a bunch of other junk as well. I’d like to have a word with her. Anyway, that’s for another day.”

“No problem.”

I turn around, taking my new vest with me.

“Just a moment,” says Artemiy from behind me. “Who are these serious friends of yours? What’s their business?”

“There’s this guy. They call him the Predator.”

Saying a friendly goodbye to Sledgehammer, I collect my guns. Having transferred everything from my old waistcoat to the new vest, I put it on. It feels unfamiliar. The armour plates add weight, and I won’t be able to move as freely as I used to. But then I never was much of sprinter, so I think that can safely be ignored.

As usual, the bolt scrapes behind me. Hoisting my now much heavier backpack on my shoulders, I walk down the steps. Vova is waiting impatiently for me at the bottom. I offer him my old waistcoat.

“A gift for you.”

“Wow, cool! Thanks, I owe you one.”

I can see there’s an unspoken question in his eyes. More than one, in fact. Judging by the change in my dress and the bulges in my backpack, my business with the shopkeeper must be going well, so it makes sense to get closer to me – maybe he’ll get some other freebies.

After a little thinking, I take a pack of shotgun shells out of my backpack and nod to my companion.

“Your shotgun’s a twelve-gauge, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“The pockets in that waistcoat are empty. You’d better put something in them.”

That’s all it takes. Now he’s devoted to me. Of course, his boss will ask questions when he sees his new outfit, but I doubt he’ll take it away. I’ll have to think of a way of winning over the bandits who guard the checkpoint, too. But that’s definitely a question for another day.

* * *

Lounging in the shag pad, I spend some time loading up the pockets of my webbing with all sorts of useful stuff. For example, I find a pocket where a field dressing fits perfectly, and there’s also somewhere to put the bottle of antiseptic. It’s plastic, so there’s no risk of smashing it. I could, of course, go back to the shopkeeper’s again today, take my assault rifle, and bring back another load of groceries. But no, not today. I need to rest. My excursion this morning took a toll on my nerves. I need to soothe them somehow, and I even know how I’m going to do it – eat well, knock back a glass of brandy, and sleep. First, though, I’m going to heat up some water. Not too much, but at least a panful – I can’t waste too much gas. Even that’s enough for me to wash with. Sure, I’m not going to soak in a bath, but at least I’ll be able to get rid of the dirt. And there’s plenty of that. Sadly, there’s no water that can wash away the dirt from my soul, but there is good medicine that helps to forget that kind of problem.

I jump up and take Mishka’s laptop out of the cupboard. It’s time I took a look at it. The computer in front of me is, as I expected, pretty sophisticated. Dronov had not put a password on it, whether as a result of his self-confidence or for some other reason. The screen lit up as soon as I pushed the power button. In fact, remembering the intrusive supervision that those tunnel-dwellers had kept up, I’m really not surprised there’s no password. I remember reading in some clever book that an assiduous guard can easily turn into a jailer, and I think that applies pretty well to this situation.

One of the gadgets attached by a cable to the laptop turns out to be a reader for the codes from those very memory sticks. The ones that had a code on them, obviously. The second was for writing the code once read onto a new storage device. As it is, I don't have any other storage devices, but still...

According to Mishka's notes, they had fully mastered the process of reading the codes, and there were already several key files saved in the corresponding directory. All that remained was to put a new memory stick in the port of the writing device. Of course, there was one more little problem – I still had no idea what locks those keys would fit into. Never mind, there'll be time to think about that later.

Flicking through Mishka's files, I found another interesting folder. From what I could see, it contained information copied from the different keys. Dronov's pedantry – a quality he could exercise when the job at hand demanded – had prompted him to label each file with a descriptive title that contained the number of the key if it had one, the date the file had been copied, and the name and surname of the owner. True, in most cases that field was left blank. After all that information came the text of the file itself.

I got caught up in the texts, and it was only the warning beep telling me that the battery was critically low and the computer would shut down automatically in a few minutes that brought me back to myself. There was nothing I could do – there was still no electricity in my basement – so I regretfully switched off the laptop.

I stay seated for a while, trying to put together a full picture from the pieces of the puzzle I've obtained from reading part of the files. What I can make out so far is this: The management of the transnational corporations headquartered in our city not only knew of the possibility there would be an evacuation, they were actively preparing for it. At the very least, they had no intention of preventing or delaying it. Moreover, they were planning to use the circumstances for their own purposes. From what I could understand, they also intended to evacuate a significant part of the ordinary staff from Tarkov, exploiting the measures taken by the municipal government. With this in mind, they had halted and mothballed production. It was mentioned that there had been some unexpected difficulties with this,

the cause of which nobody understood. There was one thing that made me freeze in front of the screen for several minutes: “They’re already here.” These words were repeated in the text several times, and from the context it was clear that the writer was describing something he was thoroughly familiar with. He might well have been, but I’ve no idea what he means. I’d only ever heard that phrase once, and that was from the lips of the tunnel-dwelling interrogator. So you can guess who picked up the phrase from whom. The owner of the memory stick presumably knew something about that mysterious group, but hadn’t got round to putting whatever it was he knew in writing. So now I’m sitting here in front of the screen, scratching my head. Anyway, the computer’s switched off, and my appetite for work has abated. Now I can get some sleep.

* * *

The next day, I made my way to the shopkeeper’s again, having decided to get one of the bandits at the checkpoint to help me carry my goods. I’ve no doubt Vova will be happy to assign someone the task – by entrusting him with the role of middleman between the gang and the shopkeeper, their boss has already de facto raised him in the ranks. I imagine he no longer has to do sentry duty, and that’s a significant promotion in its way. Of course, it could all be a very temporary benefit. All it takes is a stronger gang with greater numbers to come along, and Vova will be back to hiding in basements, cowering from his enemies’ bullets. And in all honesty, I’m not much better off than him in that respect. At least he’s got a gang behind him, and what have I got? A mythical figure that nobody’s actually ever seen. A great deal of good he’s going to do me!

All these thoughts flew from my head, however, when I saw on a very familiar doorway a diagonal line drawn in chalk. The bandits’ boss wants a meeting. So, what are the risks in that? I doubt very much he’s inviting me for tea and crumpets. Finding a burnt piece of wood nearby – that’s quite a feat of memory, recalling that there was a bonfire here – I strike through the line with it, and then continue on my way to the bandits’ checkpoint.

It turned out Vova was on duty there, and he had no objection to arranging a couple of porters for me. After his parting words to them, they looked at me with unconcealed respect and even a little fear. With their help, I was able to get most of the load of goods home in one go. Pointing the bandits to a hidey-hole in the basement of the neighbouring building, I watch as they stash the tins and boxes in there. Then I ask them to step aside, and spend some time working my magic around my stores, demonstratively stretching thread and wire here and there. Let them think I'm booby-trapping the place. At the very least, their desire to come back and check out my stash by themselves will be gone before it's even formed in their brains. And I'll move everything over to my basement during the night.

I'm back in the same now very familiar entryway. I sit on the first-floor landing, examining the handiwork of the shopkeeper's craftsmen. You have to give them their due. In skilled hands – not mine, obviously – Shorty has been completely transformed. In place of the wooden forestock, there's now a latticed metal construction with a comfortable handle attached to the bottom. Affixed to the side of it is a powerful torch. Alright, so I don't think I really need the torch much, but it does have another very useful gadget – a laser target finder. For a marksman like me, that's an indispensable bonus. A mount has been attached to the top of the gun, on which has been placed a new sight. Not the sort that I've seen in movies on sniper rifles – this one's completely different. In the middle of the lens there's a shining red dot. Pavel showed me how to adjust and turn on the sight. The transformation was completed by a strangely-shaped fat metal tube attached directly to the barrel. As Sledgehammer explained, this is a silencer. Somehow, I don't remember anything like it from my army days, and the silencer on my pistol looks completely different. True, I doubt very much that an assault rifle is ever going to fire as quietly as my pistol. The bullets are a lot bigger, after all, and the kick it gives is considerably more powerful. When he handed Shorty back to me, Pavel explained that it's sighted at a hundred metres. In all honesty, I doubt I could hit a parked car at that distance, but I didn't let on. I thanked him and slung the gun on my back. Chances are it will just sit in my basement waiting for its moment, and that moment will never come. My trusty shotgun, on the other hand, I

did my very best to clean the day before. It took a whole lot of time, but I did manage to get the dirt off it somehow.

A door slams downstairs, and I hear footsteps. Glancing round the corner, I see the back of the bandit's boss as he heads for the door.

"Are you leaving already?"

He turns around, but his hand doesn't go for his gun.

"Good afternoon!"

"Greetings!"

"I had a feeling it was you I was going to find here. When the Awl told me that you'd turned up, and showed off his present, it occurred to me that I'd have the pleasure of seeing you here."

So, it turns out the bandit's boss can be diplomatic when it's required of him.

"You were right there. It'd be daft to hide now your people have seen me. And more than that, I've been assigned to this area."

"You mean it was you at all the previous meetings?"

I adopt a confused look.

"I'm afraid I don't even know how many there were. Our roles are clearly defined. I'm just a liaison, and that's all."

The boss looks with interest at my assault rifle.

"Are all your liaisons armed like that?"

"We don't like too much noise."

He nods appreciatively and gets down to business. Yesterday, a group of soldiers appeared at one of their checkpoints. Judging by their uniforms,

they weren't from the army or any other Russian service. There was no shooting. The bandits showed a fair amount of good sense, and limited themselves to warnings. Appreciating this, the senior soldier asked them to tell their boss that their gang needed to make themselves scarce within the next two days. They could choose themselves where to go. If they didn't get moving, then the soldiers would be happy to give them a push in the right direction. True, after that there might not be anyone left to move anywhere. The soldiers' translator spelled it all out quite clearly.

"Your representative said before that we shouldn't fight with them, and we've tried to keep our word on that. But what are we going to do about this announcement yesterday?"

"Unfortunately, they don't always agree amongst themselves. Did their commander give his name?"

"No. They said they'd be back at the same place in two days' time."

"Which way did they go? Can anyone show me?"

"That we can. After all, we know our own town a lot better than they do. One of my men followed them. They've taken over an office building in a factory not so far from here. Some of my boys recognized them, too. They've been seen around the neighbourhood before. They were guarding something, and they used to visit the shopkeeper one in a while."

"What provoked this sudden visit? Did you manage to bother them somehow?"

Here the boss hesitates. There it is! Presumably, one of his thugs, drunk on his newfound power, shot his mouth off at the wrong moment. It's a shame. They've fucked up, and now I have to sort out the problem. Wouldn't it be easier just to pack up and get the hell out of here? Sadly, not any longer. I can't move all the stuff I've collected quickly and I've got no idea where exactly I'd be taking it. I'm up to my ears in this business, and there's no chance of getting out of it in the same shape I got into it. I can't see any way out.

Before setting out on any journey, it's always worth getting thoroughly prepared and checking all your equipment. Considering all the circumstances surrounding my expedition, I decide to leave my shotgun at home. As I'm hoping to get by without any shooting, it's better not to take such a loud and powerful gun.

When it comes to shooting with my pistol, I know what I'm doing. Shortly after his makeover is a different matter, and it seems like a good idea to check. With this in mind, I head for the attic of a building with an old-fashioned gable roof. There's a chance that shots in the attic won't attract too much attention. It's a long building, around a hundred metres, and the attic runs the length of it. I'll be able to find my range, as Ivan used to say. Placing an empty box on one of the beams, I walk about fifty metres back and set the gun to single fire. The bolt makes a greasy squelch as it pushes the round into the barrel. I get myself comfortable on the floor and turn on the laser target finder. I press a button on the sight, bring it to my eye, and take aim. The dot in the sight and the red point of the target finder don't quite align. That's probably the way it should be, as Pavel did say the gun was sighted at one hundred metres, and the distance here is far less than that. That must be why the beam of the target finder is a little off. Still, the box is big, and even if I'm aiming a little high or a little low, I'll still hit it. Holding my breath, I pull the trigger. From what I can remember, experienced marksmen always hold their breath before firing. Why they do it, I've no idea, but I guess I should follow their example.

The sound the shot makes is surprising. Obviously, the assault rifle is louder than the pistol, and there's no way of suppressing the noise completely. Nonetheless, it sounds more like a loud crack than a booming explosion. It's definitely better than before. To my ears, it's a very unfamiliar sound, so I'm hoping that the enemy won't be able to work out where it's coming from quickly. I go to look at the box.

I hit it! Not in the very centre, of course, but the bullet did still go into the box. If a person had been standing here, I'd have certainly done them some damage. Feeling more cheerful, I go back and this time fire a dozen rounds at once into the box. The bullets are scattered "like a bull's piss", as our head of security would say. It's alright for him, he's a good shot. Me –

not so much. No matter how many rounds I fired off with Shorty when Ivan and I were running, I doubt that any of them got closer than half a metre to the target. Now, I hope, things will be very different. At the very least, the modified assault rifle sits much better in my hands and jumps around a lot less when I'm firing.

Returning to my basement, I remember that it wouldn't be a bad idea to check my pistol, too. Rooting around in my stuff, I pull out that box of bullets with the blue tips. Should I give them a try? Surely one shot won't ruin the pistol. For my test, I choose a few thick directories that are standing in a row on the head of accounting's desk. I'm not a fan of accountants... A shot with an ordinary bullet goes straight through two directories. Flicking through the pages, I find the bullet. It's crushed and lying sideways. Fine, now let's try a blue-tip bullet. This time the shot sounds sharper. It's hard to say if it was louder or not, but the sound was definitely different. There was also a difference in the effect of the bullet on the directories. It had penetrated almost as far, but the hole it made was a whole lot bigger. And the bullet itself looked like a badly-made pancake. The cavity inside the final directory was extraordinary. These bullets are going to do a lot more damage than the standard rounds. Picturing the kind of hole that bullet would have made in an opponent's leg, I simply shake my head. It's a shame I've got so few of them. Still, I reload the whole magazine with them.

At the same time, I fill up the assault rifle magazine. This time, my backpack's almost completely empty. The bandages and other necessities are now stored in one of the pockets of my webbing. I have two magazines, and I put the spare in a special pocket on my chest. There's no spare magazine for the pistol.

I jump up and down on the spot. If the movies are to be believed, you should always do this before moving out. If you've put something in the wrong place, you should be able to hear it clank. Most of the pockets on my webbing are empty, though, and there's nothing that could clank in my backpack. True, you can hear the armour plates shifting in their pockets, but it's hardly a clank.

My plan was exceptionally straightforward. By using those very same cable ducts, I was going to travel underground to the factory office building. The ducts ran straight to the building, with one interesting difference – access to them was not through a manhole cover, as it was elsewhere, but through a door that led straight into the basement of the building. I'll go in, quietly have a look at what's going on, and act accordingly. One option, of course, is to shoot off a few rounds and start a panic. While they're working out what happened, time will tick away, and they probably won't make it to the bandits' checkpoint at the appointed hour. If I actually wound one of them, they'll also have all the fuss and bother of treating them. My task is just to delay their attack.

I make my way to the bandits' checkpoint and ask them to tell their boss he should put reinforcements there. Just in case. Deep down inside, I'm relying on the fact that, if someone notices my intrusion too soon and I have to run, I'll be able to lead them straight here to the bandits' checkpoint. Hopefully, when they understand where they're going, they'll decide not to chase me any further.

Having gone about five hundred metres from the checkpoint, I find the familiar hatch to the cable duct. I look around, then lift it and jump inside. It's not far from here to the factory, so I turn the torch to minimum brightness and slowly move along the tunnel.

Wait, what's this? Crouching down, I take a look at what's caught my eye. Ordinary lumps of clay. The sort that would come out of the treads on a boot. Now, that's interesting. It's dry outside, hasn't rained recently. There's certainly no water in the cable duct. And, obviously, no wet clay either. How did this get here then? I touch a lump of clay. Still soft, which means it hasn't had time to dry. Which means the guy whose boot it fell off was down here quite recently.

Suddenly I feel uncomfortable.

That means there's somebody here. I don't expect anything good from anyone in this town. The people left behind here aren't overflowing with the milk of human kindness.

After a few more steps I see new lumps of clay. This really isn't good. But there's nothing to be done about it. I keep going. I feel a damp draft from somewhere, and bring up my assault rifle. I'm in tunnel with concrete all around, so any bullet I fire off target, provided it doesn't get stuck in the cables, will bounce off the walls and keep flying forward. The main thing is to shoot first. A shower of bullets is bound to catch somebody. Then I'll have the chance to run away. Or maybe not. My opponent's bullets will fly exactly the same way.

I take another twenty steps, and a black spot of some kind appears to the left in my torch beam. Getting closer, I find a fresh breach in the wall of the tunnel. That's where the draft is coming from. No wonder it's damp – instead of concrete panels, there's ordinary earth under foot. Who the fuck, I'd like to know, put this here?

Walking about twenty metres forward, I enter an ordinary tunnel. It's much older than the cable duct I was walking through. On one side there are metal pins in the wall which hold up pipes and cables of some sort. The walls of this tunnel are lined with bricks that have fallen out in some places and crumbled in others. I sniff the air. From somewhere there's a definite smell of burning. What could that be? As it happens, whatever it is it's not a question that bothers me much right now. Returning to the tunnel, I take from my backpack one of the ever-useful forks and tie it with thread in such a way that anyone coming through this new hole in the wall will send the metal crashing to the concrete floor. I hope that I'll hear it.

About a hundred and fifty metres further on, the tunnel starts to rise. That's as it should be, somewhere round here should be the factory. After another fifty metres, I turn the torch off completely and move forward ever so slowly on tippy-toes.

In front of me glimmers a weak light. Interesting, do they have electricity in the factory? From what I remember of the basement from when we were laying the cables here, there weren't any windows. So, now we slow to an absolute crawl.

Once I reach the door, I crouch down next to it. There are a few horizontal slats in it, through which I can look into the interior of the

basement. The door to the cable duct is in a narrow end wall, so I can see almost all of the basement. It's not very big, something more like a narrow cell than a proper room. A weak lightbulb hangs from the ceiling. There's not much light, but enough to see that the basement's empty. The door to the cable duct needs a key to open from the other side, but from here you can open it just by pressing on the right lever. From what I can remember, there should also be a separate switch somewhere. When you open the door, somewhere on the security monitor a light comes on. True, due to some peculiar administrative logic, the switch that activates the light is actually inside the tunnel. In other words, if I understand correctly, the factory guards were more concerned to stop people leaving unnoticed than to stop people getting in. With the help of my torch, I look for the switch. There it is – a little box with a lever coming out of it. The free end of the lever presses against the door.

Now it's easy. A switch like this uses contact closure. The lever holds up a spring that moves when the door opens, bringing the plates into contact. Out of my pocket I pull a piece of wire that I've brought for just such an occasion, and short circuit the wires coming out of the switch. Now I can go backwards and forwards as I wish, and the light on the monitor will never come on.

The badly oiled door scrapes unpleasantly. There's nothing I can do about that. Stepping into the basement, I crouch down and take a look round. I need to get to the ground floor. From there, there's a staircase going up. Upstairs, there's an interesting room with windows looking over the whole territory of the factory. I haven't taken even two steps when I hear a thunder of boots from behind the door. It's slammed open and hits the wall with a crash.

"Stand where you are and drop your weapons!"

Instead, I pull the trigger. My pistol's long been in my hand. As I was coming out of the cable duct, I was already holding it ready to fire at the first sign of trouble. The shot knocks the guy to one side. Staggering, he leans his shoulder on the door frame, and then I fire twice more. His gun clatters to the floor, and he slumps over on his back.

Well, that is unfortunate. Everything's gone tits up from the very beginning. I mean, that guard can't have been here on his own, can he? No, of course not. The whole building fills with shouts and stomping. That's my spying mission over. Time to get the fuck out of here. I squeeze through the narrow doorway and hear behind me a commanding shout. I crouch down and let loose a short burst of fire in the direction of the shouting. My pistol's already back under my arm, and my hands are holding my assault rifle. It fires much faster, after all, and with far more power. Behind me I hear cries of displeasure, and I shoot like a bullet along the tunnel, as fast as I can before one of them gets to the door and starts firing after me.

I reach a turn. Once round the corner, I press against the wall and glance back. A second passes, then another, and then a torch beam splashes across the tunnel walls. A burst of fire from me, and the bullets whistle off in the direction of whoever's holding the torch. At least they'll know the risks of coming in here. While they're working out what to do, I'll be getting away. They'll think more than twice before they dive into this unfamiliar tunnel, and I'll have time to run fuck knows where. I sprint down the tunnel almost to the point where the breach gapes in the wall.

Pyow! Something whistles unpleasantly over my head. It's dark down here! I haven't turned on my torch, and there's no light coming from the enemy. Are they just firing at random? Even if they are, I still need to run two hundred metres if I go straight ahead. The chances of being able to do that without getting hit are very, very small. That first bullet went over my head, but there'll be a second and a third and as many more as they want to fire. There's nothing for it, I turn into the breach. I crouch on the floor. My heart's beating like it wants to jump right out of my chest. What am I going to do? Now that my initial panic has subsided a little, I remember that the shouts I heard were all in English. Which means these troops are foreign. Very, very possibly part of the corporation's security service, most of whom are English speakers. From what I remember, they had all sorts of useful arms and equipment. Well, their usefulness for me personally right now is debatable. They gave us a special talk one time, about how it wasn't worth even thinking about taking anything off the premises in secret. They'd see us, they'd hear us, and they'd catch us, whether it was broad daylight or the darkest night. In other words, whoever's firing at my back right now might

well have some sort of gadget that allows them to see me despite the pitch-black darkness. Further evidence that they have something of the sort is provided by the current lack of shooting. The shooter doesn't see his target, so there's no reason to open fire. If that's the case, then I'm not going to be able to hide here either. They'll still see me.

So, I need to think of a plan. As luck would have it, not a single thought comes into my head. All the while, entirely unwelcome sounds can be heard from the cable duct – shuffling and scraping. Someone's coming down the tunnel. Let them come. Waiting till the sounds become more distinct, I lean forward, stick my rifle round the corner, and spray the remaining rounds across the tunnel. Shrieks, panic, and random shots come in return – sounds like I've hit someone. They won't feel quite so at home down here now.

I jump up and run for my life towards the other tunnel. I dive in there, sprint forward a few more metres, and land straight on a bunch of cables. If the insulation is damaged on even one of them, I'll fall down dead right here. My only hope is that, as the electrical supply is so fucked up in the city, there may not actually be any current in any of them.

Here's a comfortable spot for a lie-down. I pull myself up with my hands and turn sideways. I turn off my torch and squeeze between the cables and the tunnel wall. I have to lie down, if I sit up they'll see me. I lie flat, pulling off my backpack and pushing it a little way in front of me. Only then do I rummage through my webbing and pull out the spare magazine for my rifle. I change out the empty one, and them remember that the box of bullets is in my backpack, and I can't get it out from here. Shit... Well, what can you do? We'll make do with what we have. I really should have found myself another magazine by now, even if I had to buy it.

I hear footsteps. As the sounds come nearer, I stop even breathing.

"Mackenzie, Jarosch, Schreiber – with me on the right! The rest of you go left! And check everything down here!"

Men walk past below me. Quietly, almost silently. I stay silent, too, as you'd expect. Even though my nose starts itching unbearably. I need to

sneeze, and there's nothing I can do about it. I put every effort into stopping myself. I don't think anyone's going to say "Bless you!"

They're gone. I stay completely still, holding my breath. Let those smartarses move a little further on. I count to thirty under my breath and quietly slip back down to the floor. I gather up my backpack and throw it on my shoulders. Where to now? Back to cable duct, where else?

I stride quickly back, and suddenly I hear the crash of a shot behind me. From the sound of it, that's a shotgun. I run forward flat out, and see the flash of a torch beam on the roof of the tunnel. Someone's running towards me, and I'm only a few metres from the turn.

I pull the trigger, but my rifle just clicks. What the hell's that all about? "Have you tried pulling the bolt back?" asks the voice in my head with its habitual snideness. "There aren't any bullets in the barrel, see?" Now there are. The bolt slaps back into place.

Recalling that the gun jumps around more the longer you fire, I try to limit myself to short bursts of three or four bullets. Even so, some of the bullets go way off course, and I see sparks. They jump off the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. Makes no sodding difference, they're still flying in the right direction. There's a fair chance they'll still end up where they need to be – we're not in a park down here, and it's not like there's anywhere to hide.

Talking of hiding, I very nearly rushed straight past the turning. It was only a sudden gust of wind from that direction that reminded me to turn. And just in time, as a string of fire races straight past me. What sort of bullet is that? When I was in the army, I only saw them firing tracers once, and that was from quite a distance. So that's what they look like close up.

My rifle's empty, so on my back it goes. My pistol magazine is half-empty, too. I drop to the floor and point towards the turning. Where that shot just came from, I hear a serious shootout kicking off. From the sound of it, the group that was heading that way has bumped into the unknown diggers of that new tunnel. Well, the best of luck to them and a feather up their arses! I wish the lot of you excellent shooting.

I don’t know what the guys I shot at were thinking, but none of them turned towards me. They just ran straight past. I manage to contain my disappointment.

I run back into the cable duct and keep on running. Where the fuck am I going? That becomes clear only when I run into something. Dropping with a crash to the floor, I let go of my pistol and it skitters off somewhere.

My torch! In the dim light, I see a body on the floor. So, was I running the wrong way? And where’s my gun? There it is, the little pet, glinting in the torch beam.

I pick up my pistol and take a calmer look at the body. The uniform’s clearly not Russian. What’s this badge on his sleeve... USEC? At a guess, this guy had the misfortune to catch some of the bullets I sent flying down the cable duct. Can’t say I’m sorry for him.

I bend down and pick up his gun. This is something new. Definitely not an AK. I’ve seen these in movies and games – an American assault rifle. There’s some sort of complicated sight fixed on top of it, a serious piece of kit with buttons on it. Let’s see... I raise the rifle to my eyes. In the greenish light I can see the cable duct stretching away in the distance. So, that’s how they can fire in the dark. I put my pistol away in its holster and, with a bit of fiddling, pull the webbing off the corpse. It’s quite a weight. On the dead man’s belt, there’s a big knife and a holster with a pistol. I take all that, too.

The sounds of shooting aren’t getting any further away, but they’re not getting closer, either, so I’m not too worried. I’m not lounging around, though, it took all of thirty seconds to search the dead guy.

Holding the trophy rifle at the ready, I run back towards the factory. I hope there’s nobody guarding the exit, as I’ve no desire to run the other way into the gunfight.

The basement’s empty. All I find is a lone corpse lying in the doorway – the one I shot with my pistol. He only has a pistol, and the same webbing vest. I’ll grab the pistol, but the webbing’s too heavy. Still, I take a

moment to drag him under the stairs. Hopefully, nobody will look for him here. While I'm at it, I take a few spare magazines for my pistol out of his webbing. That's the clever thing to do, and it's about time I learned. Mind you, it didn't help this smartarse much, did it?

I turn to the right onto a landing. On the left is an open door. I peak inside. Ah, I see... My self-esteem drops like a lead balloon. On the floor are several sleeping bags, which means that the guys now running round downstairs were all quartered right in here, does it? And, clever me, I ran straight into their lair? That's what it looks like. On the floor, there are various boxes and chests. There's no point in even thinking of carrying them out of here, but I can at least hide them somewhere. Boxes begin to fly out of the landing window. Down below is long grass that'll hide them easily. And anyway, nobody's going to be looking right under their nose. Once they're gone, the assumption will be that they've been carried far away. Who'd bother to steal all these goodies just to move them a few metres to one side?

While I'm carrying the stuff backwards and forwards, a crazy thought comes into my head.

As I run, I try to reload Shorty's magazines. It doesn't work out so well, and I drop a couple of bullets on the way. Never mind, I keep running. I turn a corner, crouch down and ram the reloaded magazine back into my rifle. At the same time, after fiddling with the fastening, I take the sight off the looted rifle and put it in my backpack. Without pausing and without paying much attention to what I find, I turn out the looted webbing and shove everything from it into my backpack, too. The webbing's now much lighter, so I fold it up and secure it under the top of the pack. Now I've had a little rest, too.

I hurry on, constantly looking from side to side. Another turn, and I don't have much further to run. There's the bandits' checkpoint. Anxious faces look out over the sandbags. Stepping out to one side, Vova nervously holds up his shotgun.

"Quick!" I half shout, half wheeze. "One of you stay here, the rest with me! Let's move! Don't take anything but your guns!"

They hover around in confusion, the useless sods.

“Who said they didn’t have enough weapons?” I throw the looted rifle to Vova, then crouch down, pull my backpack from my shoulders, and throw the webbing to someone else. I take two spare magazines for the rifle from my backpack and hand them to Vova, too.

“There’s more where that came from!”

“Fuck me, lads! Let’s get going!” shouts somebody nearby.

Nearly a dozen men come charging after me. We run back to the factory office building fairly quickly, and don’t meet anyone on the way. As we squeeze through a gap in the fence, I point to the window.

“Over there! Keep your eyes open!”

Bristling with gun barrels, the whole crowd bursts into the room with sleeping bags.

It’s empty.

“Take everything you can and get back to the checkpoint fast. Two guys with me!”

I dash out onto the staircase.

“Down there,” I say pointing to the grass beneath the window. “There’s a whole bunch of boxes and cases. Pick them up and get them back to the checkpoint fast. Just the two of you.”

With the rest of the bandits, who’ve already got the taste for looting, I run down into the basement. One of my companions is already chewing on something and another, without stopping, is gulping from the neck of a dark-coloured bottle. Where the hell did they find all that? Impressive.

“Through that door,” I tell them. “You go down about a hundred metres, and there’ll be a junction. Turn left, and you should find a bunch more bodies. I’m sure you know the rest.”

Hollering as they run, the crowd disappears through the doorway. I hope the sheer weight of them will be enough to crush anyone down there.

Chapter 13

I sit with my back resting against the sandbags. Inside I feel empty. No thoughts, just nothing. Around me, the happy bandits are babbling away. In all fairness, they have a reason – plenty of reasons, in fact. There's an impressive pile of all sorts of equipment dumped on the ground, and standing on a bipod with its barrel pointing proudly to the heavens is a light machine gun.

Coming back from the tunnels, the bandits looked like hoarders. Down there, they'd found more than a dozen dead bodies, and only three wounded. Who they finished off quickly, by the by. Now all the kit and weapons they found are piled up on the tarmac waiting for the boss. He appears soon enough, and I hear the bark of orders. Still, he's not my commander, is he?

I pull the empty magazine out of my rifle and start to fill it with bullets. I should have done that earlier, but somehow I didn't get round to it.

The boss gets the picture fast. Assessing the state of play, he doesn't touch the guys I personally gave kit and guns to. The rest of them he sorts out ruthlessly. Some of his men are rearmed straight away, and he assigns a machine-gun team who hurry off somewhere with their new trophy. Only then does he come over to see me.

"Shit, you're quite a piece of work!" He sits down next to me. "The lads told me what they found down in the tunnels... Fucking hell!"

"Aah," I wave away his praise. "It's good to have a job to do. But I did manage to lose a magazine."

"Yours is a Model 5, isn't it?"

He gets up, takes only a couple of paces, and comes back with three magazines for me. Just the right number for the pockets on my webbing – there's exactly four of them. One more in the rifle itself, and I've got a hundred and fifty bullets ready to fire.

"With our compliments!"

"Thanks."

"They call me Gavrish, by the way."

"Denis," I say, and then remember a long-forgotten nickname, "Foretop."

"How do you do?" he says, offering me his hand.

Well, it's not the worst time for introductions. I place my hand in his.

"You got us some really good stuff there! I've sorted it all out – we'll put your share aside, fair and square. I'll make sure of it myself."

"My share's not much at all, but the chief will send someone for his."

Gavrish nods his head in understanding. He thinks for a while.

"Foretop, listen. I've got an offer for you. What about coming over to us? We've got a real need for fighters like you."

I laugh. It's a good offer, until he actually sees me in a fight.

"You know my boss. Imagine how he'd like that. There's a good chance I just wouldn't wake up one day."

Gavrish shakes his head sadly.

"I'll tell you this, though," I say, changing the subject. "The building where those soldiers were holed up is very comfortably situated. Have you thought about moving? It's time you spread out a bit. You've got the guns, and plenty of bullets."

“I’ll send some lads out today and get Bald Kolya to come under our wing. He’s got people, but when it comes to guns...” The boss chuckles. “There’ll be ten more, no question.”

“He won’t refuse?”

“I won’t ask. I’ll knock him down a peg if needs be. But you’re right about the factory.”

“Just make sure your lads fill in the hole down in the basement properly. You never know who’s going to pop up from there.”

“I’ll get someone onto it now.”

Now I’ll have a socket to plug my laptop into.

Vova comes over to join us. He’s beaming from ear to ear. He’s already wearing the webbing, the looted rifle on his shoulder and a pistol at his hip. He’s kitted out now, and it’s like he’s grown a little taller.

“Over there. It’s all ready.”

The loot has all been carefully sorted. The guns are in one pile and the kit laid out next to them. To one side stand all the boxes and cases of ammo and food supplies.

The boss looks at his mob.

“Fair’s fair,” he says, nodding in my direction. “He gets first choice.”

The gang express their approval loudly.

Well, then, what have we got here? American rifles. But I’ve barely even got used to Shorty yet. No, I’ll pass. I move on, and hear sighs of relief behind me. Apparently more than one of them had his eyes on a new gun.

Next come shotguns – about ten of all different varieties. But I’ve already got a perfectly good one, so moving on...

Pistols. Here I pause and crouch down to rummage through the pile. No, I don't really need anything. I've got my SIG, and it more than does the job. But I'll take one anyway – I've seen them in the movies. You can switch them to burst fir and they've got a huge magazine – thirty rounds at least.

All sorts of webbing. What for? I've got one on me, plus the one I collected beneath the staircase. That's plenty.

Helmets... Wait a second! On one of them I see something like binoculars mounted on a clever little frame. Night vision? That I'll take.

"By the way," I say, turning to the boss. "Hold on to those things, and don't flog them off to the shopkeeper. They're so you can see at night."

"Yup," he nods. "There's several more of them. Do you need them?"

It's breaking his heart. You can see it written plain on his face.

"Keep them, they might come in useful. I'll just have a look at the sights – I'll have to send one back to the chief."

I didn't bother to tell the bandit what I had lying in my rucksack. Greed can grow so fast sometimes it'd put a prize bull to shame.

Radio sets. Without hesitating, I take three straight away. I'll find a use for them. I also take the battery charger for them.

Ammo. Everything for the American assault rifles I leave. I'll take fifty shells for the shotgun, you can't have too many. And among the pistol ammo I find familiar boxes with the blue-tipped bullets. I'll take all of those.

There's a big sack with a red cross on it. Is it the only one? No, there's another, but not quite as big.

"I'll take that," I say, pointing at the smaller one.

From the food supplies, I take a case of tinned meat and five red and white cardboard boxes of German soup. I've tried it before. Each box contains twelve packets. Eat one of those a day, and you'll keep hunger more or less at bay.

"That's all."

The boss grunts contentedly. Apparently, he didn't expect to get off so lightly. He gives the order, and everything I've chosen is taken off to one side. He really does have something of the general about him. Watching him share out the loot between his men quickly and fairly, I realize my leadership skills have a long way to go.

In place of the ragged mob of deadbeats with a motley collection of arms, we now have something that more or less resembles an organized fighting unit. Less rather than more, sure, but it's still quite a change! On the outside, and from a distance, they could be taken for a serious military force.

"Just say where to," says Gavrish, turning to me, "and the lads will bring it over."

That evening, having with some difficulty dragged part of my loot back to my nest, I get down to sorting out my prizes. The guy that I killed first had exactly the same kind of pistol as me, except that the silencer was separate – stored in a special pocket of his vest. Blue-tipped bullets in the magazine, too. The fact this isn't all a coincidence is confirmed when I find a familiar memory stick in the inside pocket of the vest. So, that's where they come from. At a guess, that guy must have been some kind of officer.

Which means? Which means you need to put those guys down as fast as you can, no thinking.

The bullet that came out of my pistol almost tore the guy's leg off. At any rate, the hole it left was massive. It doesn't take much imagination to picture what he might have done to me. And I've got a rich imagination, so I quickly dismiss that type of thought from my brain.

* * *

The next day, I popped in to see Mr. Ogryzko and get rid of some of my loot, and was met with considerable warmth. Pavel gives Shorty a friendly nod.

“Been working, has he?”

“Just a little,” I answer, trying to sound as off-hand as possible.

“How was it?”

I bring out the night sight.

“If I could get this thing on it, it’d help.”

Sledgehammer shrugs his shoulders.

“But that’s what the stand on top of the gun’s for. What’s the problem?”

Is it? Well, aren’t I the idiot? I had no idea.

“It needs adjusting. I took it from a different gun, and I’m no expert at that sort of thing.”

“Ah, well, you’re right there. You need a bit of know-how to do the job properly. Hand it over, then. The things we do for friends, eh?”

The shopkeeper was in a thoughtful mood. He immediately accepted the night sight that I’d ended up with when the loot was shared out. He turned it in his hands, switched it on, and nodded with satisfaction.

“That’ll do nicely.”

And then... Well, there wasn’t really anything I needed. When it came to food, considering my appetite, I must have had enough for nearly four

months, if not more. I didn't need ammo for now, either. In fact, I had some to get rid of. Instead, Ogryzko offered me money – to pay for stuff later if I needed it. Basically, not a bad idea. So, everything was concluded to our mutual satisfaction.

Then, while Pavel was tinkering around with my rifle, we got down to the main part of the conversation.

The shopkeeper pulled a bottle of vodka from somewhere and nodded to it.

"Will you have a little?"

"Brandy would be better."

He had that, too. Really pretty good brandy, I have to admit. He poured, we clinked glasses... and somehow I almost missed the main point of the conversation.

To give him his due, Artemiy knows how to talk. He knows where to put a pause so you can guess the rest. Or he can ask a question like he wants to get your opinion of something in a way that stops you from grasping the real purpose of the conversation until long after. Gradually, however, I began to get the picture.

The shopkeeper was seriously worried by the increased power of Gavrish's gang. When they were relatively smalltime and amateur, there had been no cause for concern. Ogryzko's customers could easily squash a gang like that, or even a bigger one, without much effort. It would be worth it for good relations with the shopkeeper.

But even that wasn't the most important thing.

"Your, er, leader has decided to help them, fair enough. What the fuck you need with them is none of my business. But here's the thing," Artemiy raises a finger, "they grow, they take control of more territory, and then what?"

I shrug my shoulders.

“I hope there’ll be less shooting around here, and I’ll be able to come see you without dodging more bullets than are absolutely necessary.”

“Well, that’s as maybe. But will that be true for everyone? I’m a businessman. I don’t want my customers to have to go to too much trouble. Otherwise, it could hurt my business. Sure, my customers can stand up for themselves, but do any of us really need a war?”

Aha, so that’s what it’s all about. The guy’s seriously worried about losing his flow of customers. Well, let’s say he does have some reason to be concerned. With no “bright” future ahead of them, the bandits are quite capable of putting an extra tax on the people who come this way. That’ll have an effect on sales, no question. People will just vote with their feet and look elsewhere.

“So, you want me... us to have a word with Gavrish?”

“We’re happy to compensate him, within reason of course. That could mean a reciprocal arrangement of almost any variety.”

So, it’s “we” now, is it? Well, yes, it’s not like the shopkeeper carries all the goods here himself, is it? He’s got people who take care of that side of his business. And it’s not like he puts the money he earns in a big chest. It must go somewhere, and there’ll be other organizations that take care of that.

“No problem. I’ll pass on your concerns to the management. But...”

“As I said, we’re ready to look after different interests.”

Is that a subtle hint about a cut for me? I’ll take it. After all, I do understand a little bit more about retail than about military matters.

“I imagine your matter will be considered with the utmost urgency. Good neighbours deserve a helping hand, don’t they?”

I leave the shop with a couple of bottles of brandy in my backpack. Turns out that's the very first backhander I've ever received from a business. And it is a backhander, because the shopkeeper sees me as some sort of authorized representative of a serious organization. That de facto gives me a certain status in his eyes.

Alright, so now I have to think of something, and fast.

I find one of the bandits at the checkpoint.

"Tell Gavrish I need a word with him. I'll be here in an hour."

And off he runs, just like that.

I guess the boss takes his ally seriously. I didn't even have to ask – the bandit leader's clearly given some very specific orders regarding how I should be treated. Is that a good thing, I wonder?

Well, let's say the boss doesn't turn up in an hour. Sitting in a looted flat in one of the nearby buildings, I have a good view of the checkpoint and the people manning it. In fact, I notice a couple of guys with guns in the building opposite who are also watching over the bandits' base. If I'm not mistaken, that's where the boss sent the machine-gun team. That's smart. The guys at the checkpoint have shotguns, which only pose a threat at short range, while the machine gun has them covered at a much greater distance. Someone's got a good head on their shoulders. I'm learning slowly, and fortunately I've had some good teachers.

And there's the man himself. Not coming alone, there's a couple of men with shotguns behind him. His bodyguard, I guess.

Anyway, now I can go.

Gavrish sees me from a distance and gives a friendly wave. And why shouldn't he? Judging by the way his men are behaving at the checkpoint, everything's going pretty good for the gang.

"Greetings!" he says, offering his hand.

“A very good morning to you, too,” I answer in the same friendly manner. “A word in your ear?”

We move off to the side a little, where the bandits have set up an awning. The space is enclosed on two sides by thick walls, and protected from the street side with more sandbags. It’s cleverly built, I can’t deny it. We’re a reasonable distance from the other bandits, too, so nobody’s going to hear our chat. At a sign from the boss, the bodyguards stay back a little, making sure no one else comes near us.

I pull a bottle of brandy out of my backpack and place it on a bench which must have been brought from one of the neighbouring courtyards – there was nothing like it round here before. Seeing my offer, the boss in turn pulls out a tin of ham and a pack of hardtack, all of which was stored in a pocket on his webbing. Next to this, he places two plastic cups. So, he’s always got that lot with him, has he?

Interestingly, all the blood stains have been carefully cleaned from his webbing. There’s someone here who’ll do that, too? They really have got their housekeeping in order. The boss looks altogether a lot more serious, not like the ringleader of a bunch of smalltime crooks anymore. He’s dressed in good, almost new, fatigues. He’s got a new belt with a pistol holster, he’s got his new webbing – it makes quite an impression. He’s even neatly shaved, which is more than can be said for me. It’s the lack of water – you don’t always get the chance to wash even.

“Let’s get going then!”

We get going on the brandy, and it goes down nicely. Down a well-worn path – I’m still not completely sober from my visit to Ogryzko.

“Business first,” I say, covering my glass with my hand.

My idea was as simple as ABC.

I gave a loose retelling of the shopkeeper’s worries.

“So, you put up a few more checkpoints and you take control of the whole neighbourhood. We need peace around here! Within reason, of course. We can’t put everyone down, and nobody’s asking you to. The chief’s already given his approval. The shopkeeper will take care of your cut. We’ve talked to him, and he won’t make a fuss. We’ll sort out the fine print. You need to get on good terms with the cops, too. The ones who came here. They’re short of food, but they’ve got a shitload of ammo. They’ll give you guns, too. But that’s my job. I’ll get it sorted.”

The boss scratches his head, deep in though.

“Of course, it’d be... Hell, it sounds pretty good. If only we had a few more men, though. Another forty wouldn’t hurt.”

I don’t want to spend too long on this question of reinforcements. I could say completely the wrong thing.

“I’ll tell my people. But you don’t need just anyone, do you?”

“True enough,” agrees the bandit.

“There’s one more thing,” I say, looking around. “Soon some guys from over by the port will be paying a visit, if you know who I mean. The ones who used to deal drugs.”

Gavrish’s face darkens.

“I know the ones. Nasty guys. Low lifes, the lot of them. I was hoping...”

“That someone had already got rid of them? Sadly, no. I had a word with their boss. Quite a character. But we made a deal. He’s promised to get me something. So, I need you to keep order. As you well know, they’re not the easiest people to deal with, and our shopkeeper’s not on good terms with them. It’s probably best he knows nothing about it – I don’t want to give him an ulcer. But they do have some interesting goods.”

Here the boss falls silent for a while.

“I see. So they don’t want to get together, right?”

“I’d say it’s more like they can’t. And they’ve got different bosses. But we can carefully keep the distance between them. That guy doesn’t want much to do with the Predator either – even he doesn’t have the stomach for it. So, you see the way it is.”

After that, the conversation turned to specifics. True, it was Gavrish who did most of the talking. I just nodded and occasionally threw a phrase in here and there. To give him his due, there are certain things that Gavrish has a solid grip on. And when it comes to meets and mob summits, he knows it all. Inside out. A lot of the expressions he uses I’m hearing for the first time, so it’s best to keep my mouth shut. Maybe he’ll take my silence as a sign of intelligence. From what he said, it was clear there was no way out without a fight. We were surrounded by competing gangs. True, there was no love lost between them, which gave us a slightly bigger chance of success.

“Do you know the bosses?”

The brandy’s going down well. It’s hard to get my words out straight.

“Not all of them. Too many have come out of nowhere. Can you imagine an accountant could be laying down the law to the Merchants?”

I’m not sure quite what he means. By “Merchants” does he mean bandits? Or thieves? I read something about it somewhere.

“No,” I answer quite honestly. “I can’t imagine it.”

“See! But that’s what’s happening.”

“It’s a fucking mess,” I agree heartily.

“It’s hard to know how to do business with those guys.”

“You say who, and we’ll talk to them.”

What? We'll talk! I'll sort the fuckers out! Right, I think that's enough brandy for me.

Gavrish, however, doesn't share my optimism.

"Still, it's risky... There's all sorts out there."

I take the magazine out of my pistol and show it to Gavrish.

"You see the bullets?"

"They're blue. So what?"

I put the magazine back and nod to the bodyguards – let them know what's coming. Gavrish turns to them and makes a calming gesture. Everything's under control.

What should I shoot? I don't have any directories with me. But I do have the bench. It's a thick plank, six centimetres at least. Let's say I put one under the corner... The effect surpassed all my expectations. It broke off part of the bench, splitting the wood every which way. Gavrish bends to the ground and digs the bullet out of the earth.

"Yup," he says, tossing it in his hands. "You guys have some persuasive arguments.

I chuckle, and put my pistol away. Not forgetting, I should add, to put the safety catch back on.

"What can I say? We know a thing or two."

Right, I really need to stop drinking. Soon I'll be throwing grenades around. True, I don't actually have any, but...

Chapter 14

The meeting between the representatives of the two bandit gangs took place on neutral territory – in the city courthouse. It was housed in a mansion set back from the street and some distance from any other building. All approaches to it were clearly visible from the checkpoints of the two groups, which meant there was no need to fear attacks.

By a twist of fate, Gavrish knew the building very well. Inside out, you could say. Several years before, he'd been tried there and given a three-year sentence. Now, chuckling ironically, he examined the citations from various articles of law that covered the walls.

His opposite number – a deputy to the leader of the opposing group known as the Boar – was running a little late. That was probably his way of showing his disdain for the meeting.

The gang known as the Merchants, so called because the railway depot was located in their territory, was reasonably old and "distinguished". It was led by a thief in law called Foma, who wouldn't deign to talk directly with Gavrish, whom he considered beneath him. It had been a different matter with Kiryukha the Axe, who was also an initiated thief with all honours. His replacement, however, wasn't even a real villain, just a common thug. That's why they sent the Boar to the meet. At least they didn't start shooting straight off. Besides, Gavrish wasn't complaining. He knew he had some pretty solid arguments on his sides. Plus, he was already acquainted with the Boar, had known him quite well in the past.

The door scraped open and an armed bandit stepped into the foyer – the Boar's bodyguard. This was already an open breach of all agreements, but Gavrish said nothing. Having looked around, the bodyguard turned back and said something. Only then did the Merchants' deputy himself step into

the building. Having seen how the two parties shook hands, the armed bandit stepped back out onto the street.

“So, what’s the problem?” The representative of the older gang got straight to the point: “Spit it out, I don’t have much time.”

“You’re not hurrying anywhere,” chuckled Gavrish. “Don’t give me that shit, OK. We’ve known each other too long.”

“Foma won’t be happy.”

“Let’s forget about him for a minute, alright? Have a seat, get the weight off your feet.

The Boar looked around unhappily. He went over to a row of folding chairs leaning next to the wall. He chose one of the cleaner ones, unfolded it, brushed off the dust, and sat down heavily on it.

“Well? Have you got an explanation for what you’ve been doing?”

“What exactly interests you?”

The Merchant laughed, then briefly outlined their grievances. What it all amounted to was that Gavrish should remove his people from two nearby blocks and release the shopkeeper from his protection. That would mean the end of the gang, and the Boar knew it.

“Is that all?”

“For now.”

If Gavrish gave up that prized real estate – which covered some luxury developments and warehouses – his men would quickly start abandoning him in search of a more successful leader. Then the demands would get greater.

“You knew Kiryukha the Axe, didn’t you?”

“Knew him? The Axe was a respected thief. The fact that you let him die is a big black mark. Normally, there would have been questions.”

“They’ll be asked soon enough,” thought Gavrish to himself.

“Have you seen one of these before?” he asked the Boar.

On the arm of the fold-out chair, he placed a squashed pistol bullet on which the blue paint was still clearly visible.

“It’s a bullet. So what?”

“Kiryukha was killed in a closed room. Vitalik the Razor was standing next to him, and didn’t see anybody. I don’t know if you remember him, but he’s not one to make up stories.”

The Boar frowned as he searched his memory.

“Yeah, I remember him.”

“Right, so Kiryukha was eating, and suddenly he jerked back. Blood just started gushing out of him. Three bullets, but nobody heard a shot. And we were all nearby.”

“That’s bullshit...” said the Merchant uncertainly.

“Ask Vitalik – he still hasn’t fully recovered. And then,” says Gavrish with a chuckle, “he got a tender tickle behind the ear with a pistol. They told him to count to a hundred before turning round, and they made it clear that this wouldn’t be the only dead body. If we didn’t pull ourselves together, there could be plenty more.”

“Yeah, right. That’s a crock of shit...” The Boar’s shoulders twitched nervously. “There’s no such thing as invisible men!”

“Actually, there is,” said Gavrish calmly. “I’ve had chats with them, and I’ve never seen one of them either. They always show up out of thin air, and disappear in the same direction. They’re always behind you, always with a pistol at the ready. Kiryukha, rest his soul, decided to ignore their

warning, and they set the soldiers on us. We barely made it out of there, and we left ten men behind."

The Boar scratched his head in concentration.

"Are you sure you didn't make all this up? You and the shopkeeper, and all the rest..."

"He came from them, too. Their man promised that Artemiy would make friends with us, and he did. The cops came along, and instead of fighting they gave us ammo. The USEC guys started bothering us – go over to the factory and see for yourself what became of them. This guy's not fucking around. If I was Foma I'd take precautions too. You know, just in case. You haven't crossed paths with them yet, or at least not as far as I know."

The Merchant twisted the bullet in his hand, then dropped it.

"So who is this fearsome beast?"

"They call him the Predator. Must admit, I'd never heard of him before. You know about the Hood, don't you?"

"The drug lord? Is he still alive?"

"He'll outlive us both, I wouldn't mind betting. Turns out he's great mates with the Predator's man. It's all hugs and kisses with them. He's sending a package over soon, and I've got to meet it. You can come and have a look if you want. Come yourself or send some of your men, we'll meet them."

"I'll think about it," said the Boar, slowly getting up. "You have a think, too. I'll hold Foma off for now, but if you're lying to me..."

* * *

Morning again. I'm not much of an early bird, mainly because I've never been a great fan of getting up and going to work. Today, however, it's a good one. The sun is happily throwing its rays in all directions, and a thousand little sunbeams are jumping and bouncing along the walls from a thousand shards of broken glass. The windows are all blocked in the room that houses my shag pad, so you don't get to see this sort of thing. Which doesn't bother me, obviously, as nearly all I do in there is sleep and you don't need light for that. Moving into the next room, I see the sunlight bursting through the dirty glass of the window.

Mishka's laptop is sitting in my backpack, and I'm taking it to the factory to plug it into the mains. Next to it is the equally useful uninterruptible power supply that I took from the two-floor flat. I picked it up a while back, and I've been planning to put it to good use. Now I'll get to charge all this stuff, as I still don't have any power in my basement.

Keeping my eyes skinned as usual as I go, I notice a few changes in the landscape around me. My visual memory is pretty well trained, after all, and even seemingly insignificant changes somehow register subconsciously in my brain. "The corner flat on the fifth floor. The window's open, and there's sandbags on the sill. A sniper's nest? Quite possibly. From there you've got two streets covered at once. And why's it not on the top floor? So that nobody can drop anything on them from the roof, of course. Plus, those windows don't attract the same amount of attention as the ones on the top floor."

It's interesting how my subconscious works, it really is. I now notice things that just a short while ago would have meant nothing to me. It's true what a wise man once said – social being determines consciousness. I don't want to get beaten again, so I keep my eyes peeled. I remember everything that I've ever read or heard. And sometimes thoughts just pop into my head. Now, there's the entryway to that flat on the corner. Have they protected it? Otherwise the bad guys can just climb the stairs and say hello. I'll have to mention it to the boss.

In general, it's worth paying attention. Gavrish, it would appear, is preparing for war. I don't think he's come up with all this by himself, so he must have found a reliable advisor. I'll have to take notes. If I don't watch

out, they'll have posts like that staked out round my pad, and then somebody will see where I'm living. Not sure that's such a good idea.

Arriving at the checkpoint, I wave to the bandits and they answer me respectfully. That's another turn up for the books, isn't it? Who'd have thought I'd be offering my support to a bunch of thugs rather than, say, making friends with the police? After all, I know where the police are, and they're not badly disposed towards me, which is worth something. Although they're not all policemen there, either. Still...

But I live here, and I'm friendly with the bandits. Funny how life works out sometimes. Here's a guy who walks the streets with guns slung all around him, unshaven and mean-looking. He drinks brandy with a bandit boss and does business with drug lords. Is he one of the bad guys? Of course, he is. He shoots people, too. But inside, he's just a scared little bunny. True, he's grown himself a thick, bulletproof hide and some sharp teeth and claws. But has that really made him a different person? Good question, and one that I don't have an answer for right now.

Turns out the guys have done a great job fortifying the factory offices. Sandbags are stacked in the windows with only tiny cracks between them to shoot through. All sorts of junk have been piled around the building, leaving only a narrow, twisting path. Moreover, the piles of junk were laid out so that they couldn't be used as cover from gunfire from the top floor. Off to one side, they're also setting up a lookout post in some kind of tower. As I watch, two bandits equipped with a crowbar and a sledgehammer are knocking embrasures in the walls. It makes sense – that'll be covering the attackers' flank.

The bandit on guard duty recognizes me and steps out of the way to let me past. There's a contraption made of iron bars wrapped in barbed wire that he pulls open for me. It won't be easy to run up to the entrance now.

"Is the boss in?"

"On the first floor."

At the entrance to the building, I find another guard and a similar structure of bars and barbed wire. This time, he doesn't pull it aside, but instead lifts it up using a pulley. It's a fortress! You won't take it without cannon.

I immediately turn into the basement.

They've been working down here, too. There's so much stone and rubble piled up against the walls, that a whole company of miners would have trouble getting through it.

"We tried to bring down the tunnel. Semyon put some TNT down there."

I turn around. Gavrish is standing on the upper landing. Next to him is a short, stocky guy. Could that be Semyon?

"How did it go?"

"We filled it in ten metres deep."

"Have you got yourselves an emergency exit?"

It's Semyon who answers: "The lads are going to knock down a wall in the basement. Three days or so and we'll be through to the building next door."

So, this guy's the local fortifications expert.

The boss and I head up to his room. On the way, I stop by a socket, move the junk aside, and plug in my laptop. The little green LED lights up – there's a current. I pull the battery pack off the uninterruptible power supply from my backpack, and plug that in too. A couple more trips and all my batteries will be charged up. Semyon watches my operations with interest. That's fine by me. All the extra gadgets for the computer are still in my basement, so at first glance it's nothing more than a normal laptop. Plus, I've put a password on it.

“I saw your lookout on the fifth floor,” I tell Gavrish as I sit in a chair by the table. “Have you got it covered from the stairs?”

The boss throws a glance at his fortifications expert, who shakes his head.

“We’ll put some sandbags down tomorrow, and seal off the landing from all sides. My mistake – I should’ve thought of that myself.”

That’s decent of the guy – he holds his hands up apologetically, and gives me a respectful look. We’ll get on fine.

Then, before the conversations’s even got going, a bandit rushes into the room with shotgun in hand.

“Outside! We’ve got visitors!”

There’s a thunder of footsteps and everyone rushes to the embrasures. I follow, slinging Shorty from my shoulders.

* * *

Our visitors are just over a dozen men in camouflage. Obviously foreign. Are they USEC? Looks like it. They’re looking with wonder at the fortifications the bandits have managed to throw up in two days. The guys working in the tower have gone into hiding, but the barrels of their guns are poking watchfully from the freshly-made holes. Next to me crouches Semyon. He’s expertly and efficiently plugging a wire that runs downstairs into some gadget or other. What the hell is it?

“I’ve got a kilo of explosives down there,” he explains, seeing my questioning expression. “I discharged an old fire extinguisher and slapped it in there. Added some nails and a bunch of other old scrap. If they step any closer, it’ll have much the same effect as one of your bullets.”

I can imagine.

Our visitors aren't hurrying forward, however. One of them brings his hand to his mouth. Is that a radio?

"Get me a radio, fast!"

It takes a second, then another, and a bandit appears beside me. In his hand is a looted radio set. I hope nobody's been dicking around with the frequencies.

"Red two calling yellow group."

So, that's red group number two out there, is it? And you'd have to assume that yellow group are now all lying in the tunnel.

"I'm here from the Predator," I answer in English.

There's a shocked silence at the other end. They'll be trying to work out who the hell this unknown Predator who's hacked their frequency is. No doubt they'll be remembering the movie.

The boss approaches, staring at the radio in my hands.

"Who the hell's that out there?"

"Friends of the guys lying downstairs. They want to start throwing their weight around. I let them know whose toes they might be stepping on, and now they'll think twice about it."

Gavrish gives an evil grin.

"Well, well. A flag in their hands and a drum round their necks."

"And a medal on their graves!" I say, remembering the expression.

There's an ugly laugh from the bandits.

"They can fucking try!" says the boss, summing up the general mood.

"Red two calling. We're sending a negotiator."

“They’re sending a guy out to chat,” I say, translating our visitors’ message for Gavrish.

“Semyon, keep a look out!” orders Gavrish.

He puts his rifle in the corner and looks at me.

“Are you coming?”

Now, what can I say to that? I could refuse, of course. I’m not a member of the group. But how would they take it? I hang my rifle on a random nail, and stick the radio into a hoop on my webbing.

“Let’s go. It’s always good to talk.”

At the end of the pathway stands a man in military uniform. As far as I can see, he’s not armed. Although, judging by the size of him, this guy could manage quite well enough with just his fists.

“Greetings to you!”

“Top of the morning to you, too,” nods the boss.

“You were using our frequency. Does that mean you’ve got one of our radio sets?”

“That’s not all we’ve got,” agrees Gavrish. “We’ve also taken over this building.”

The soldier frowns.

“Are our... comrades not here?” He struggles to find the Russian words.

“No,” I butt in, “they’re definitely not here.”

“Where are they?”

“They had the misfortune to step on the toes of somebody whose toes you really don’t want to step on.”

He has a little trouble understanding this.

How best to explain?

“There are some people, VIPs, whose affairs you don’t want to get involved in. Your comrades couldn’t understand this. When we came along, it was all over already. All of them were dead. We moved in to an empty building.”

This, apparently, he understands.

“They had a key with them. A special key. It’s very important to us.”

“I’m afraid we didn’t find any keys on them.”

“Can we take a look at the bodies?”

“If you want to go mining, then why not? You’ll need to dig a shaft twenty metres deep. That’s how far down they are. We blocked off the entrance and blew up the tunnel.”

“Sorry, I need to talk to my commanding officer. Please could you wait here?”

The guy disappears. We step back inside the gate and crouch down. Gavrish shakes his head thoughtfully. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it.

“What was that bullshit you were telling them?”

“Do you really want to fight?”

“Not particularly, no.”

The negotiator wasn’t lying. Five minutes later we hear the crunch of gravel under boots. They’re approaching.

“Our commanding officer, George Merry.” says the negotiator, introducing his companion.

“Gavrish,” mutters the boss. “I’m the leader of this lot.”

“Commander of a civil militia,” I tell them in English.

“Police?” asks Merry with raised eyebrows.

“No, not the police. A civilian militia, a civil defence group.”

Well, we’re not soldiers. But we’ve got guns.

The soldiers glance at each other. It takes them a while to catch on. Or, on the contrary, they understand all too well why and when Russia ended up with a militia rather than a police force.

Back to Russian: “We need to take back this territory. We have orders.”

Gavrish chuckles, showing very clearly exactly what he thinks of their orders.

I shake my head.

“Unfortunately, we also have our orders. And we’ll be following them. I strongly advise you not to still be here when darkness falls – it’s not safe.”

“Are you threatening us? With force?”

I turn to the building and point out the fortifications.

“Do you really think we put all that up just to protect ourselves from your attacks? How many men do you need to storm that building?” I repeat the question in English.

They’ve got nothing to say to that. They won’t be taking the building with their ten-man platoon. But I don’t stop there.

“Please understand, it’s not you we’re afraid of. There’s something else a lot more frightening round here, and that’s what we’re protecting ourselves from. If they attack you, we’ll give your group cover fire, but that’s all. We won’t be letting you inside. Nobody in there wants to die, and if you come in the bad will follow.” Again, I repeat the last phrase in English.

The translator spends some time explaining what I said to his commander, who frowns and protests. They’re talking quietly, so I can’t make out their words.

“You’re bluffing. We don’t believe you.”

“You’re welcome to wait and see what comes out of the darkness.”

“What? Are wolves going to come and eat us?” laughs the translator.

“It’s not wolves you need to worry about, it’s the Predator.”

The commander’s mouth twitches, and he turns away. His translator quickly ends the dialogue and hurries after him.

“See that!” grins the boss, “they didn’t even say goodbye.”

“It’s no surprise. I explained to them who they really needed to be afraid of here. If they want to lock horns with the Predator, they’re welcome.”

Back inside the building, we pick our guns up and head back to the embrasures. We watch the soldiers retreat a little, take up positions, and lie down out of sight. The radio stays silent, so we can assume they’ve changed the frequency. Their commander is probably consulting with his managers now. Good luck to him. He won’t hear anything new about this mysterious enemy. I’d love to know more about him myself, in fact.

The question is whether or not they’re going to attack the building. Time passes agonizingly slowly. My mouth’s dry and I’m dying for a drink.

“Guv’nor!”

But we don’t need to wait for explanations.

A file of men in uniform is slowly disappearing round the corner of one of the workshops. They’re leaving. Leaving without a fight.

“Chickens!” jeers one of the bandits standing next to me.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, “they’re just afraid of the Predator.”

The End